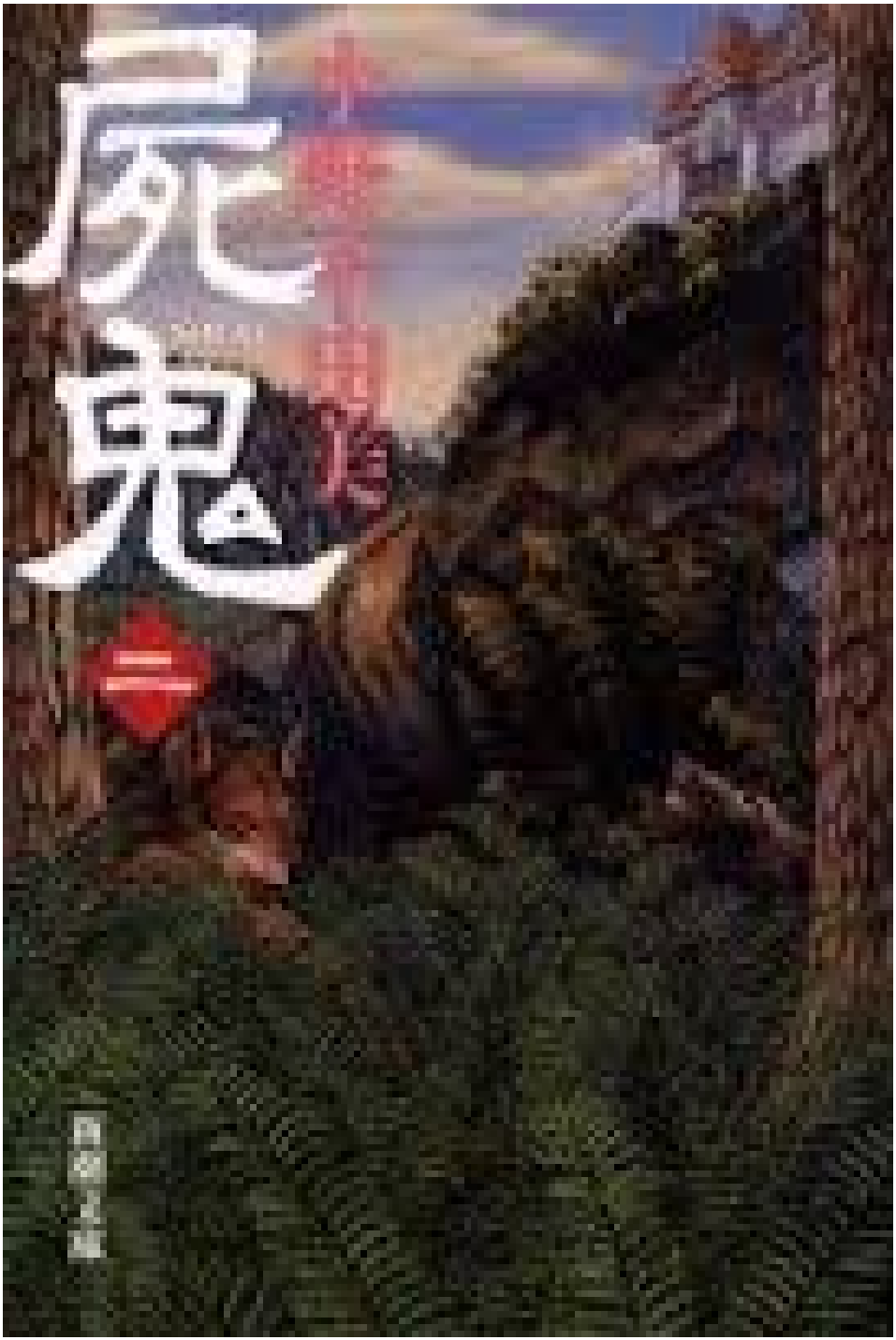
屍鬼
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藤崎竜

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sinnesspiel

Chapter 7

1

It was two days after Setsuko's funeral, October 13th, just coming on noon that Yasumori Atsuko of the Maruyasu Sawmill brought Yasumori Tokujiro in for an examination at the Ozaki Hospital.

"Since losing Setsuko-san, now Tokujiro Oji-san is all alone you see, we were going over to take care of him but ever since the funeral he's been so pale. I thought it was only natural but it seemed like if I wasn't careful he might only get worse, so."

Toshio nodded at Yasumori Atsuko's words. It was another case of that. Indeed all of the symptoms were present. Going by the blood test results the first stage had passed. They'd attacked twice, maybe three times, Toshio calculated in his thoughts. It was possible it started directly after Setsuko had died.

"To the treatment room," Toshio noted to Kiyomi. "1000ml lactated Ringer's solution, 15 minute checks."

"The catheter?"

"18G."

Tokujiro did not respond as Toshio instructed motioned about the room. It was Atsuko attending to him who seemed more worried. Even when Toshio plunged the catheter needle into him he only faintly furrowed his face without showing any particular sign of emotion.

"About Setsuko-san?" While treating him, Toshio spoke to

Tokujiro. "She had said she had seen a dream of Nao-san. She wondered if she was coming to pick her up, she'd said. I told her it wasn't good to say such defeatist things, but none the less."

When Toshio said that, Tokujiro showed only the faintest reaction.

"Ah..... Nao-chan, huh? ..... I saw her too."

Tokujiro's face looked somewhat blessed.

"A dream of Nao-san?"

Mm, Tokujiro nodded. After nodding he gave no further response.

"You can't get weak hearted," Toshio said to Tokujiro, looking to Atsuko. "I do think it'd be best to have him hospitalized, though."

Before Atsuko could answer, Tokujiro cut in.

"I won't."

"Tokujiro-san?"

"I'll pass. I won't be hospitalized. I won't go anywhere. I have to watch the family altar."

Atsuko soothed him saying that she could see over the family altar if that was the problem but Tokujiro distinctly declared that

"I won't."

"Being hospitalized didn't help Setsuko, and with the family altar and work I can't leave the house empty. Just let me be."

Toshio furrowed his brows. It wasn't at Tokujirou's topic. He was uneasy about how he said it. Patients being able to have a firm will at this stage was rare. Almost all showed an attitude of 'do whatever

you want.' It was like it was another person's issue. That meant that so distinctly expressing any will was strange, and in spite of that the way it was said was strained, almost as if reading off memorized lines from the odd sound of it.

Is that your own will, Toshio wanted to ask. Or did somebody---did Nao give you detailed instructions to say that? If Atsuko and the nurses weren't around, by all means he would have asked him.

"As far as Setsuko-san's case, all I can do about it is apologize but Tokujirou-san needs to be hospitalized too. If I don't have you hospitalized, I can't give relevant treatment. I know how you feel but I wonder if I couldn't at least have you stay for two nights? If after that, you want to go back home no matter what, I'll let you do what you want, so."

If two days went without an attack, his consciousness would clear and probably return to normal wouldn't it, Toshio was thinking. But Tokujirou insisted "I don't want to." He exhausted his words trying to convince him but it didn't seem like Tokujirou was listening to his words at all. Atsuko said that she would at least look after the Maruyasu Sawmill but he said he didn't want to leave home. If the patient himself ultimately said no, he couldn't force him. There was no choice; with only a transfusion of Ringer's solution and an administration of CRCs he went home.

"I wonder if he'll be all right, Tokujirou-san, I mean."

Giving a vague response to Kiyomi's uneasy words, Toshio entered the waiting room. After just a bit of hesitation he picked up the phone. After three rings, Mitsuo picked up the phone.

"It's Ozaki. Seishin there?"

"Right now he is working. What is it?"

"Sorry, but when he's finished could you tell him to contact me? The Yasumori's Tokujirou-san fell, tell him."

"Tokujirou-san did. ---Is he all right?"

"He's really not doing all right is the thing. I suggested he be

hospitalized but he wouldn't agree to it. If he can I'd like Seishin to convince him. If he still says he doesn't want to no matter what, then I want him to help him out and make sure he can sleep through the night properly, tell him if you could. If you say that he'll know what I mean."

Sure, Mitsuo said, not sounding convinced by his explanation, but Toshio said that he was in the middle of examination hours and hung up the phone.

He said he didn't want to be hospitalized, was insistent on staying home, but he couldn't imagine that was Tokujirou's own will. He had a sure feeling he was instructed to say that. When Setsuko was hospitalized, it was a problem for them. If the bunch of them all got together with a single goal, then from now on probably all of his patients would refused hospitalization.

As he was thinking about it the phone rang. A woman's voice on the other end sounded frantic.

"Uhm---This is Shimo-Sotoba's Maeda."

"Maeda? Iwao-san's place's?"

Yes, the woman answered. It was Maeda Motoko.

"What's happened?"

"My husband is acting strange," Motoko said with her voice seeming hushed. "No, he hasn't collapsed or anything like that. It's the same as my father-in-law was. It looks like anemia but..."

Toshio nodded. "Please bring him in, immediately."

"That's," Motoko said, hesitantly. "My family..."

I see, Toshio said clicking his tongue. Motoko's mother-in-law Tomiko hated doctors. As a result, once Iwao had died, it had only become more resolute, he feared.

"Your mother-in-law?"

My husband too, Motoko said letting out a heavy breath. Toshio knew the situation.

"Is your husband at work today?"

"Somehow he was able to take today off."

"Then I'll come by this evening."

I am counting on you, thank you very much, Motoko said, hanging up the phone with a relieved breath. She was happy that Toshio had judged the situation without having to make a fuss. Putting the phone down, Motoko peered into the living room. Her mother-in-law Tomiko was out in the fields. Her husband Isami was lying down seeming terribly sluggish. Even when she urged him to get into bed, he insisted there was no need. Because he had taken off work, she couldn't not cling to his arm and beg him somewhere out of Tomiko's sight. Motoko could by no means operate a vehicle, so she couldn't force her husband along to the hospital. That Toshio had known what she'd needed had been a relief from the bottom of her heart.

Motoko entered the living room and peered at her husband's face. Isami looked dubiously up at Motoko but seeming troubled by the effort he immediately closed his eyes.

".....For lunch, how about rice porridge?"

"Don't need it."

Isami's words were blunt and low.

"But."

"Going one or two days without eating isn't that big a deal."

I see, Motoko said breathing a sigh. Her husband's pallid face, the way he spoke, it all exuded the same washed out feeling that Iwao had had.

(It can't be.... Not him too.)

Motoko thought, shaking her head.

That shouldn't be, he wasn't like Iwao. She was worrying too much. That evening the doctor would come, so it shouldn't turn out like it did with Iwao.

(Please, this is all I ask.)

If Isami were to go before her. Motoko didn't even want to think about what would happen after that. Strangely it was Kanami's face that passed through her mind. Instantly she had thought how much she didn't want it to be like that.

(That's the one thing I.... No.)

What was she afraid of? Unable to see the true form of her fear, Motoko stared down into Isami's face as if to be swallowed up by it.

sinnesspiel

2

"Thank you very much."

Takemura Genichi bowed his head to Seishin. Genichi ran a hardware shop in Sotoba's shopping district. Today was the thirteenth anniversary of his wife's passing.

In heading from the main temple building to the tatami mourning room, Genichi expressed his clear gratitude, and then charged that lately the village had quite a few misfortunes.

"It makes you wonder what's happened. A few days ago, the Shimizu's lost their son, yes?"

Seishin looked at Genichi's face. "Shimizu? Which Shimizu-san?"

"The gardener Shimizus. Masaji-san's."

"But Shimizu Ryuuji-san was this summer---" he started to say, but Genichi raised his hand saying no, no.

"The grandson. What was he called again? Uhm... Yuu-kun."

"His grandson has died?"

"That's right, he has. The funeral was just yesterday. With his son, that's two. Old man Masaji, of course, is pretty down over it, yeah? It's just him and the son's wife there alone in the house now. And then last night, the wife went back to her family too. Masaji-san figured she might be going back to live with her family himself, but who'd have thought the night the funeral was finished? That's low, that lack of empathy."

Is that right, Seishin said lowering his eyes. Masaji didn't have

any connection to him but the Shimizus weren't of the temple. Before when following up on Shimizu Ryuuji's case, he'd felt sympathy for the wife and grandson left behind, he'd wondered what the wife would do when the grandson went off to college and left the village he'd been saying but it turned out that grandson died without even going off to college.

(And even more so, last evening....)

This might have been just as Genichi had said, simply returning to her own family. But there were a lot of people disappearing in the night---abnormally often.

There was a pain deep in his heart. Seishin still couldn't seize the determination to hunt the Shiki. He couldn't get past the fact that it would be rekilling those who had returned to life. But while he was idling like this, the calamity was growing. When he thought of the dead Ryuuji and Yuu, Masaji left behind, Ryuuji's wife who returned to her family, what he felt was not a bizarre sense of care, he realized then, but guilt for his own hesitation.

"Well, it can't be helped that things turned out like this but. Still, I just can't get on board with using a funeral home."

Seishin tilted his head. Did he mishear him while caught up in his own thoughts? He didn't understand what Genichi had said. Feeling Seishin's stare on him, Genichi murmured. "Ah. The Junior Monk isn't aware yet. They've made a funeral home. ---They've finished it, right? Hey, that's right, isn't it, Auntie?"

Right behind him as Genichi turned around was the Takemura Stationary shop's Tatsu. Tatsu was Genichi's mother's younger sister.

"They've finished it. That's what I heard but that was a while ago, so it might even be opened now." Tatsu said bluntly, turning sharply. She turned her eyes to the courtyard.

"At the furthest bottom point of Kami-Sotoba, where Hirokane used to be at? There's quite a big building there. Though once the old lady was the only one left, she closed up the carpentry shop."

"Ah....."

"That old woman, she moved out with everything still in it and it became an abandoned house. But then lately there, it seems construction's started up in the area. They've put up a sign board. It says they're the Sotoba Funeral Home, it seems. ---Isn't that right, Auntie?"

Genichi again turned to look to Tatsu. Tatsu nodded with a face looking largely disinterested.

"Auntie knows all about it already, see," Genichi laughed. "But, huh. So the Junior Monk was not aware of it. If they were going to run a funeral home, it would seem like they would need to give word, to say something to the temple about it, for something like that."

"That wouldn't be necessary," Seishin prevaricated. It wasn't as if everything and anything had to go through the temple first by any means. But---Seishin had a strange feeling. There were too many who'd left the village to count. Because of that, like teeth falling out of an old and still aging comb, the number of abandoned houses in the village were increasing. So somebody moved into one. Somehow that it was a funeral home pulled at his consciousness for reasons he couldn't say.

Seeing off Genichi and Tatsu from the tatami room, Seishin returned to the temple office. With the pressure of work to be done, he would also have to pass on the meal with the parishioners.

As he returned to the temple office, there was a nemo from Mitsuo on top of the desk. From Toshio, huh, Seishin thought with a bit of guilt, peering over the note and furrowing his brows. Yasumori Tokujiro was showing symptoms---.

Seishin picked up the phone and called the Ozaki Clinic, subconsciously checking his surroundings. There was no sign of anybody in or around the temple office.

The one to answer the phone was the nurse Satoko. Saying he wanted to speak to Toshio, after a short wait, Toshio came on.

"Toshio, Tokujirou-san is..."

"It's that. Without a doubt. Probably on the second or third day. It sounds like Tokujirou-san's had a dream about Nao-san coming back too."

Seishin was silent. What Toshio was saying was clear. Seishin looked back over his shoulder. Tokujirou had just been at the all night vigil and the funeral. By then, had he already been showing signs of the illness? With things what they were, it was normal to be depressed, taciturn, it was seen as basically only normal to be in that kind of shocked daze. Looking back at it, those were indeed the preliminary symptoms but it wasn't distinct. Once again Seishin breathed a sigh at the difficulty this disease presented.

"For the time being I'm trying to treat him but he himself says he doesn't want to be hospitalized. He insists he doesn't want to leave the house. But I don't know if that's Tokujirou-san's own will or if he's got detailed instructions from somebody to answer like that. For a patient at that stage, his consciousness's too clear. But in spite of how he is all the rest of the time, he's strangely clear when he's saying no, so the odds of it being the latter are high."

"Yes..."

"Sorry, but can I have you try and stress it to him too? Can I have you talk to him for me? If that doesn't work, can you take some steps to make sure he doesn't have any strange dreams?"

Seishin nodded. "......I'll try it."

"Also, there's a little something I wanna talk about. What time'll you be free today?"

"It'll be in the evening. I'll also have Tokujirou-san to see to, so I'll be by in the night."

"Counting on it," Toshio said, hanging up the phone. Seishin also hung up and looked at the schedule. Today was relatively open. There was another service at three o'clock but in the mean time he could go to see about Tokujirou's condition, he planned.

Changing into his casual clothes in the storage closet, he searched for Miwako and Mitsuo to give them notice he was going out. As he heated further in to the house, Mitsuo himself was running up with an unusual expression.

"Ah, Junior Monk."

"What's happened?"

"The Head Monk has,"

At the sound of Mitsuo's voice, Seishin felt the blood drain out of himself in an instant. It couldn't be, something had happened to his father. As Seishin stiffened his posture, Mitsuo beckoned him.

"The Head Monk is saying he wishes to set out no matter what. Please, do stop him."

At Mitsuo's words, Seishin found himself letting out a relieved breath without thinking. "----Set out?"

"Yes. When I brought him in lunch, I'd told him at the time that it seems Tokujirou-san's health was failing him. Junior Monk, did you also see the memo I'd left for you?"

"Yes. That was why I thought I would go to visit him now, but."

Mitsuo nodded.

"And then, he said that he wanted to go pay a get well visit to Tokujirou-san no matter what. That's, I know that he's known Tokujirou-san for a long time now but even with that said. How about wishing him well by phone, I said to him but he said if I wouldn't bring him, he would crawl there!"

That's, Seishin started, his eyes wide. That behavior was completely unlike Shinmei. He had never heard of Shinmei being so persistent on having his own way against other's wills.

At any rate for the time being he went on past Mitsuo in that direction.

"Please stop," Miwako's troubled voice could be heard. "Mitsuo-san is calling on Seishin as we speak, so please, just wait a bit."

When he came into the room, Shinmei was trying to get out of the bed and Miwako was struggling with him to stop him. Miwako looked to Seishin and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Father, what is wrong?"

"I'm going to, Tokujiro-san's, for a sick visit." Shinmei's words were spoken resolutely.

"What is this about, so suddenly?"

"It isn't, about anything. He is sick, so I am, going to, see him,"

"It's well and good to pay a get well visit but are you already better?"

It had seemed like he'd had a cold---it really did just seem like a cold---as he'd been coughing hard until just yesterday. He'd had a fever too though not much of one.

"I'm fine," he said while his voice was still weathered as if from coughing.

"Father. What is this? Tokujirou-san is in poor health. If you go to see him there while you yourself have a cold, it would not be impossible for it to transfer to Tokujiro-san, and it may be bad for you as well. Can it not wait at least until you have recovered from your cold?"

"It can't. I'm going."

The helplessness in his voice was probably due to the fact that he had already had difficulty with wrods, but none the less his voice was wrought with helplessness. This was the first time he had seen his father with his nerves so driven. Seishin breathed a small sigh.

"Then, I will bring you, so please stay warm. I had just been thinking of going to pay Tokujirou-san a visit myself."

At Seishin's words at last Shinmei's expression calmed and he nodded. With a nod to the bewildered looking Miwako, he had her prepare his wheelchair.

Shinmei and Tokujirou had had a deep connection since some time back. It didn't particularly seem like intimacy or friendship but there might have been a certain fellowship. Maybe he was therefore so wrought with worry he couldn't stand it. All the same, Seishin couldn't help thinking that it was frustration with his limbs for not allowing him to move freely.

--But, in truth, it couldn't be denied that the times Shinmei and Tokujirou had met face to face had become fewer and fewer. Tokujirou himself had lost much of his color. The "making a face like it's somebody else's problem" Toshio had spoke about was strikingly obvious. Even though a former friend from old times had come by wheelchair to see him, he neither acted delighted nor troubled to see him. When Seishin had said "Father said he'd wanted to come no matter what," even then Tokujirou only responded with a short "Oh." On the other hand, when Shinmei looked down on Tokujirou's expression, he didn't say anything in particular either. That was why this somehow looked to be a farewell. It was possible his father had realized he was in his final hour and had come to say farewell to him.

"That's enough," Shinmei had said, and so Seishin brought his father to the car and returned briefly alone to Tokujirou's side.

"Tokujirou-san, how would you feel about accepting hospitalization after all?"

When he spoke to him, Tokujirou who had this entire time given nothing but inattentive answers as if uninvolved himself answered with a strangely distinct: "I don't want to."

"However, your state of health is not well. It must be difficult for you to even sip water on your own?"

"I'll pass. I won't be hospitalized. I won't go anywhere. Because I've got to watch over the family altar."

"However,"

"Hospitalization didn't save Setsuko, I've got the altar and work, so I can't leave the house. Please leave me be."

Seishin grimaced. Tokujirou's way of speaking and tone certainly gave the feel of lines being read in monotone.

"Very well then," Seishin said peering into Tokujirou's expression. "We should likely at least move you to the family altar, then. Setsuko-san and Mikiyasu-kun, wouldn't they surely be happier that way?"

Tokujirou stared dubiously at Seishin.

"You are overseeing the altar, aren't you? Then at least moving you nearer to it would be good."

"Aa... Yeah, it would."

Seishin nodded and called to Yasumori Atsuko who was doing a bit of tidying up. He had her assistance in moving Tokujirou to the heart of it. It was probably due to Atsuko's work that the altar was cleaned and tidy, with fresh flowers blossoming.

Seishin gently folded his hands and lit incense at the altar. He didn't know if this would have an effect or not but he wrapped up the incense in paper and hid it beneath the pillow and set juzu prayer beads in Tokujirou's hand. In the study that opened to the garden he placed a volume of the Heart Sutra, and at the opening a guardian deity was set in place.

"Please be of strong will. I believe that you must be quite lonely, but you must not become disinterested in and abandon yourself."

Leaving behind Tokujirou who only could and only did nod, he said his goodbyes to Atsuko and returned to the car. Shinmei was oddly quiet as he waited for Seishin.

"Were Setsuko-san and Mikiyasu-kun both like that?"

His father stared fixedly at him in the rearview mirror from the

backseat.

"……Yes."

"That, is spreading, through the village?"

"……I believe that it is."

I see, Shinmei murmured.

"What of it?"

Nothing, Shinmei answered shortly. With a deep nod as if assenting to something, he closed his eyes.

sinnesspiel

3

"Good evening?"

As Akira called out from the entryway, Azusa stepped out wiping her hands.

"My," she said with a smile.

"How is Nii-chan going?"

Azusa was a touch troubled by Akira's question. "You came to pay him a get-well visit? ……He's probably asleep I think, but."

"If he is, we won't bother him," interjected Kaori. "Uhm, Here… A get-well present."

Kaori held out a bag with a gelatin dessert in it. Azusa motioned into the house.

"Anyway, at least come in."

Akira and Kaori said their thanks and came in. Azusa went ahead of them and headed inside. "It seems like he still can't sleep. He was awake in the middle of the night taking a walk it looks like."

"A walk, you said? In the night?"

That's right, Azusa said with a troubled smile. "He came staggering back at dawn, saying he couldn't sleep so he took a walk. He didn't seem very steady on his feet. This morning he slept like the dead but he didn't really have any kind of fever or anything like that, so."

Kaori gave a covert look to Akira. Akira's was utterly wordless as

he nodded.

"Natsuno?" Azusa opened the door. There was no response but she turned and smiled at the two. "Looks like he's up. Here you go. ---It's Kaori-chan and Akira-kun. They've come to pay a get-well visit."

After talking to him, Azusa returned to the hallway. Kaori and Akira entered the room and closed the door.

"Nii-chan, you alright?" Akira hurried to the bedside to peer at his face. Natsuno seemed to give a faint nod.

"The rocks haven't moved."

"Oh," was all he replied to Akira's serious sounding report. His pallor was blue, his arm lying out flaccid.

"Nii-chan, are you really all right?"

"Yeah..... Sorry."

The moment she looked at Natsuno who said those words with his eyes half lidded, Kaori felt a chill in her legs. --It was similar, to Megumi. On the night of the Bon Feast of the Lanterns festival, the last time she'd seen Megumi. It was all too much like the way she was laid out, powerless.

".....Was it, Megumi?" Kaori asked.

Natsuno looked at the wall and answered "No," with a murmur. And then as if it were too much effort he closed his eyes.

"It wasn't Megumi? Somebody else? The reason you called Akira the other day was because somebody came, right? Then---"

As Kaori was about to ask further, there was the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Azusa had brought tea.

"Help yourself to some tea," Azusa smiled. Kaori found herself suffering at the sight of that smile. Without realizing the seriousness of the situation, she peered at Natsuno's face. "Your color's gotten a

bit better. Kaori-chan and her brother brought some gelatin, you want some?"

No, Natsuno replied, answers still short.

"Really? Then, I'll make rice porridge for dinner, so be sure to eat tonight," Azusa said, looking to Kaori. "Try not to keep him up too long, all right?"

Yes, Kaori nodded, watching Azusa leave. She didn't realize a thing. She simply thought he was sick. Even though he wasn't, even though it was something more serious than that.

Kaori pushed aside the tray and took out a cross symbol around her neck. It was something she just happened to bring. It was a cheap with shoddy workmanship, and she didn't know if something like that would be any use or not.

When she tried to put it round Natsuno's neck, he faintly shook his head in protest. "……Use it on yourselves. ……I'm finished."

"Come on, don't say things like that!"

"That's right!" Akira encouraged. "We're protecting ourselves just like Nii-chan said? We're having any visitors turned away too. So Nii-chan, you've got to work hard at it too."

Kaori hanged it at the bedside and Akira placed juzu beads around Natsuno's wrist.

"We're the only three there are. None of the adults have noticed. What're we supposed to do without you, Nii-chan?"

That's right, Kaori murmured. She hid a bag with a charm in it and laid a protective arrow across the headboard. The ofuda charm she had was just one she had taken from their kitchen, so it was possible it didn't mean or do anything at all, but for the time being she plastered it do the window glass. She placed a cross Akira had made out of pencils by his pillow. All of these were all the things that she had gathered with Akira. turning the house upside down last night. It was sad how childish they were, only able to do this much.

Natsuno turned his eyes towards Kaori and Akira, said nothing, then closed his eyes. Soon they could hear shallow, sleeping breaths. Together with Akira, she hanged her head and left the room. They returned the untouched tray to Azusa.

"Uhm... We're sorry for intruding."

Azusa smiled. "Was Natsuno-kun able to talk to you?"

Yes, Kaori said, smiling even while it meant forcing herself. Just then, Yuuki had come from the hallway. Well my, said Yuuki, smiling as Azusa had.

"Welcome."

When Azusa reported that they had come to pay a get-well visit, Yuuki smiled. "Thank you for that. That Natsuno, was he awake?"

"Yes. He spoke to us quite a lot... He seemed well, so we are relieved."

That was such a lie. But they were adults who didn't know anything, how else were they supposed to say it? This was something they couldn't tell an adult. Thinking that, she reflexively hid it. She ended up saying the opposite of the situation. It was a childish lie.

I see, Yuuki smiled.

The two children returned home and after a while Azusa began to set the dinner table. Yuuki silently rose and headed towards his son's room.

It seemed like he hadn't slept at dawn but maybe that was his limit, today, all day, he'd slept well. He'd taken a look in on him when coming back from the workshop, but he was relieved to see that he was apparently sleeping too soundly to respond when spoken to. When he woke him at noon, he said he didn't have an appetite but that he felt good. If he was able to take in visitors, he probably had gotten better.

With a light knock, he peered into the room. It looked like

Natsuno was still sleeping. He might have been making up for the lost time until now.

While thinking that and coming closer to the bedside, Yuuki noticed the things reverently set by the pillow. Two pencils were bound into a cross shape. It looked like it was made by a kid.

What kind of charm is this supposed to be, Yuuki thought. As he tilted his head, he saw that there was a single ceremonial arrow laid out on the headboard.

"What *is*

this?" Yuuki murmured, asking Natsuno. As usual his color was poor. It was better than yesterday but it was far from a healthy pallor. He tried to shake him but he only rolled in his sleep as if in protest, his son not even trying to wake up. Seeing the juzu beads in his hand, Yuuki furrowed his brows.

(What *is*

this……)

Some hazy feeling coiled in Yuuki's chest.

"Natsuno."

Yuuki called again to his son. At last Natsuno faintly opened his eyes.

"What is all this?"

He motioned to the arrow, but Natsuno didn't show any interest. He turned his eyes to it, though was he even paying attention? Then as if it were too much trouble he closed his eyes.

"Did you put them out?"

Natsuno didn't open his eyes. No, he answered with a mumble.

"Natsuno, would you wake up?" he said, but Natsuno didn't respond. He faintly opened his eyes, then closed them. It was an action showing him to be sluggish and in no mood to answer.

He's incredibly tired, Yuuki said to himself. He was healthy yesterday. His color was poor and he seemed in bad shape but he could answer Yuuki properly, he could smile, he even joked. So of course it shouldn't have been 'that.' The reason he looked worse off than yesterday was he hadn't slept until dawn, he was worn out from having visitors, because he was woken up just after falling asleep. ---There was no doubt about it.

(Then, what is all this?)

What was there seemed like a sign of some sort. He had the feeling there was a hidden message to it.

"Preposterous....."

Azusa wouldn't have put out something like this and looking at the pencils it was clear that it was those siblings who set it up.

"Just what the hell is all this?"

Yuuki haphazardly searched the room. He found the charm in the bag under the pillow and the talisman on the window.

"......This is just ridiculous!"

Yuuki himself didn't really know what it was gradually welling up in his chest. It looked like there was some reason or meaning to their things but it was too unpleasant to bear thinking about. ---Yes, the village housed those who deeply superstitious. Saying that the string of calamities were a curse, there were those who took to paper charms with religious zeal. Saying it was Oni, saying it was The Risen. Yuuki could not tolerate such ignorance.

He was irritated that his son had been caught up in all of this, irritated at those siblings. While he had been wishing for his son to meld into the village, he couldn't forgive his son being seen having such behaviors like one of those in the village.

He took down the sacred arrow, bundled up what had been gathered and threw it into the trash.

A suspicious child coming to visit, siblings coming to visit. Death and disease. The village was inundated with things Yuuki couldn't make sense of. He couldn't stand it.

It was just sleep deficiency, Yuuki said looking to his son's pale sleeping face. He was bothered by the first time death had come to somebody near to him. He was a hardy boy, and he came to his limit without voicing any complaints to that point. That's what it was. He didn't want to lump that in with the unknown that was growing thickly throughout the village, nor did he want to be drug into such a stupid uproar. Yuuki angrily confirmed that his son's room was back to normal and went into the hall.

While closing the door behind him, he felt suspicious at his own anger. It felt disturbed, like a sore spot was being pricked at. ---Like there was something he was afraid of.

sinnesspiel

4

In the darkness the child, completely worn and thus docile, awaited Matsuo. The girl was about three years old and Masao did not know who she was or where she was from. The night before last he had tried asking Tatsumi but Tatsumi said "there's no need to know."

The same Tatsumi opened the lattice door within the door. A sturdy, brand new door and the lattice door before the room left no doubt it was a prison. It was in an old, worn down house, in an enclosure in a building that would be thought of as an abandoned house, probably an originally a storage room. Now with only three tatami mats spread out were growing fluffy, it was a deserted room with nothing at all inside. No windows, nor a single futon. Only a faint, single, bare light bulb hung down. In one of the walls that surrounded it was a hole broken in through the plaster. That hole that an adullt couldn't get to without crouching down continued along to a toilet nearby. There was only a single cloth on her serving as a blindfold. That more eloquently than anything told of the nature of this cage.

In the room a rotting smell rose up. On the tatami were various sized blotted stains. Curled up atop that tatami, the child huddled like a beast in the corner. When Masao entered the room at Tatsumi's urging, she raised her face but unlike the night before last she did not sob. She was like this last night too. Rather than saying she was obedient, she was clearly weakened. Masao knelt down beside the child. Uncosciously his tongue pressed to the back of his front teeth.

There were four front teeth between the canines of the lower jaw--two on the center and two beside them, and on the backside of

those two at the side, new teeth jutted out sharply. Sharper than canine teeth, these would stab into the upper jaw if one clenched their front teeth together. At that moment a type of bitterness would spread in one's mouth. At the moment they stabbed in it hurt but once one tasted that bitterness, soon the mouth would go numb and unable to feel pain. At the same time one would feel a gentle, drunken sensation.

Grinding his front teeth several times, Masao pulled the child's arm. He pulled the unresisting body into his lap. The young girl's body was profoundly heavy and hot as well. Obediently being carried along under arm, the child's small mouth opened, repeating shallow, quick breaths. She might have really had a fever. After all even before the first time Masao attacked her she had seemed somehow completely exhausted. Maybe being in the cage for so long had taken its toll on her body. Actually, since the night before last to today, there were no traces of anything the child in the cage might have eaten.

He took her chin and had her look up. With her face being lifted, the child looked up with her throat exposed. On the nape of her small neck were two wounds. Last night Masao had inflicted those wounds. Last night it had looked to be a vivid and fresh wound as if stabbed with a nail but now it looked like the remains of an insect bite. It was faintly swelling and red with pus. A small and withering scab was at the center.

Masao's hand crept as if to seize the child's throat, stroking at that wound with his thumb. Beneath his palm her temperature was high, her breaths and pulse distinct. If he put power into his hand, he could cut off both of them. Thus at that moment, Masao quite literally had the child's life and death in his hands in more ways than one.

Standing outside of the lattice door, Tatsumi did not hurry Masao. Masao ran his finger over that wound several times, and then he drew near to her face. The young girl's vacant eyes were left open, gazing in different directions. Far from putting up any resistance, she didn't even curl her body. Calming down, he did just as he was told, seeking her pulse with the tip of his tongue. Seeking out where the flesh seemed to have small convulsions, he then bit

down forcefully at that spot.

The moment his front teeth clamped down, there was a strange reaction. Along with the faint bitterness that spread inside of his mouth, the smell of blood spread out. His own blood had once had such a raw taste and yet somehow his victim's blood tasted sweet. It wasn't sweet in a saccharine sense but more of a fatty sense. It was smoother than expected, far easier to swallow than expected. That said it couldn't be said to be like water either.

The blood flowing from the wound was rather forceful but not as if it were flowing from a faucet. Since it wasn't as easy to drink as water, that might have been for the best.

The meal took quite a bit of time all things considered. During it once the child faintly curled her body, and now she let out a voice as if crying. When her weak voice began to sob, it echoed like an omen. After that she no longer raised her voice, nor did she move her body. As his hunger was satisfied, he'd realized the child's pulse had stopped. He couldn't feel the pulse with her tongue anymore. Masao lifted his face.

"Tatsumi-san."

Tatsumi may have sensed something in the echo of Masao's voice as he opened the lattice door to come inside. Peering into Masao's arms, he put his hand to the child's neck. And then he nodded at Masao.

"It's because she's small. Even before you had attacked her, she was on her way."

I thought so, Masao said thoughtlessly pushing away the body on his lap. It crumpled onto the tatami, the blood that hadn't been stopped yet splling onto the facing of the mats and adding another stain.

For a time, Masao fixated on that dead body. Strangely so, it did not feel as if it were something he killed. After he fed it stopped moving. That was the only thought that welled up. Maybe it was because this child's body didn't seem to be injured in the slightest,

maybe it was because it was still warm. It was possible that the act of vampirism was very different from the image of injuring somebody.

"……Are you scared?"

At Tatsumi's question, Masao shook his head. "No, I feel less than I thought I would."

I see, Tatsumi laughed. "You might just be cut out for this. Congratulations, with this you are truly one of us!"

Masao nodded and turned his eyes to the corpse. "What do we do with this?"

"For a while we'll leave it be and see how it goes. Since she may rise up after all, yes?"

"You think she will?"

Who knows, Tatsumi said picking up the body easily and motioning for Masao to step outside of the cage. "The odds are higher it won't work out. Her father and mother didn't rise."

"Both parents--they're dead? Were they from the village? Who were they from where?"

"You don't need to know," Tatsumi said, closing the lattice door. It had a key, but he didn't lock it. "There's no point worrying about the birthplace of livestock, is there?"

As they left the room there was a run down hallway. Tatsumi left the room still carrying the corpse and hanged the key on a nail beside the door. There was an aluminium framed sliding door on one side of the hallway but outside appeared a false darkness. On the other side of the window there was a storm shutter in place but it was boarded up even from the inside.

Masao didn't know where this building was, what kind of house it was. Masao was not yet permitted to leave that building. Halfway down the hallway a door was installed and he was told not to go beyond that, plus it was locked. All of the windows were boarded

up from the inside, with no cracks to peek outside through. Masao wasn't exactly boarded up in a cage but there was no doubt that he was a captive in some sense.

Tatsumi walked down the hall still carrying the corpse. Partway he turned to face two doors. One was to the room Masao had woken up in, the other one was the room he was told to use last night. That room was twice as large as the one he had woken up in, and it also had some repairs and basic furnishings. Beyond that door the hallway was bound off.

Tatsumi used the key to open the door that bounded the hallway. He motioned for Masao to go.

".....Can I?"

"I said you're one of us now, didn't I?"

Masao was timid. He took a step beyond the door. The door closed behind Masao as Tatsumi locked it up and hung that key on a nail on the wall. --So then, Masao thought. On the other side of that door had been an institution for newcomers.

As Masao turned to look back, Tatsumi opened another sliding screen. Within the living room and the apparent small room was a closed glass door, and beyond that was a kitchen. That said, that kitchen didn't really appear to have been used. The dust was thick here and there, with buckets capturing drainage and the stovetops were specked with stucco. There were three corpses laid out atop the floorboards. Tatsumi added the corpse of the child he was carrying to that collection.

"The bodies of the lambs consumed from the village are stored here for a little while."

"Lambs?"

Tatsumi smiled faintly. "The livestock, I mean," he said, peering at the three corpses. "We keep them here to keep an eye on them for a while but---No good, mm? The two furthest in have started to rot."

There was a middle aged man and a young woman's corpse. Masao didn't remember seeing either of them.

"What do we do?"

"Tell somebody and have them carried off. We bury them in the mountain. Just abandoning them in the area would be unsightly after all." Saying that,

Tatsumi turned to face Masao.

"Those like you who have the prospect of rising up are carried to the room where you had woken up. It's seldom, but bodies can take a turn partway through, but generally it means they will rise. After that, they're sojourned to the back room back until they've consumed their first lamb."

"Why do you lock them in, though?"

"There are some in there who aren't happy about rising up," Tatsumi said while cutting through the kitchen back to the hallway. "That's why we have them kept in back until they're prepared. While for you it's only been three nights since you'd rise, fortunately you were quick to understand. Maybe it's a little quick but I think it's fine to let you out."

Rounding the corner, they came to another door. It seemed like every hallway lead to another door.

"Why are there so many doors?"

"For shade," Tatsumi laughed. "It was originally an abandoned house. The building was in pretty bad shape, we couldn't be sure when something might give in and let the light in, yes?"

Masao felt something off. The uncomfortable feeling in his own skin had faded bit by bit. That said, he wondered if there was a need to fear the light that much.

They continued on to the entryway. A wall as built up before the doorframe, another solid door closed here as well. Tatsumi opened it. Beyond the clay floor was a closed glass door patched over by

planks of wood. The door was locked with a key from the outside, and this key too hanged from a nearby nail. Tatsumi took down the key and opened the glass door.

"For now, you can use the shoes that are there. They might not be the right size but if you say something to a caretaker, they'll do something about it for you."

"There's somebody in charge of taking care of people?"

"There is! Those useless ones without the courage to go down into the village to attack people."

Tatsumi's voice was curt. The word 'useless' was one cloaked in disdain and Masao felt a tension in his back. Until now Masao had been special, a no good child. But being reborn he'd gained a second life. He was determined not to become 'useless.'

"It can't be helped, so they subsist on the sheep snatched away here for them. In exchange for that we have them look after other people."

The cold night air spread out past the glass door. It was the dark of night. The building he'd just left was surrounded by rice fields and other buildings lined up. To the left and right of the gently sloping hill were houses and rice fields, all wrapped within the dark mountains, the heavens and sky above the lid. The reason this appeared dyed in blue hues was because of the change in Masao's vision.

"Where... is this?"

Masao did not remember ever seeing this scene. He knew that it was a very small settlement in the mountains.

"Where do you think it is?"

Masao surveyed the scene. In the distance on the causeways betwen the ricefields in the pitch darkness he could see wandering human shapes.

"I don't know. Is it near the village?"

"Very near, yes."

Masao tilted his head then realized it. "---Yamairi!"

Tatsumi laughed. "Yes. The correct answer!"

In the early half of summer, some old people died. This was a community in the mountains whose inhabitants had died. The building Masao had come out of was at the very bottom of that community. One single house was faintly set off from the surrounding buildings but very nearby the ricefields were being leveled and concrete blocks were stacked. It seemed like they were trying to construct a building.

"A vampire village..." Masao murmured when Tatsumi gently corrected him.

"Shiki, it seems we're called. Not that what they're called changes the reality of the situation by any means, but those above hate being called vampires."

"Those above?"

Tatsumi nodded. "The people of the Kirishiki family."

I see, Masao nodded. There were the people doing labor and odd jobs at the lowest level of social strata and at the highest point were the Kirishiki family in this hierarchy, he understood.

Tatsumi went ahead of him, climbing up a small hill. In the pitch darkness of the night, it was strange for human figures to be coming and going and being about. Without a single speck of light, black shadows wriggled within the blue darkness. They went along the roads swiftly as if they had business to attend to, and others came and left the buildings.

"Unfortunately, we don't have the surplus to give each person their own room. Fundamentally each house is split between four who live together. We've obtained other houses and are taking means to make them livable but it's pretty hard to keep up, you see."

"Heeh....."

"If you're looking for someplace to stay, they'll surely tell you which buildings have extra space. It isn't as if there's no hiding houses beyond here but since you're quite new to us, I don't recommend it. It's safer to stay here for a while."

Masao nodded, and then ased: "What now?"

"What'll you do? You'll have to manage getting food for yourself, won't you? Are you asking what you should do beyond that?" Tatsumi smiled. "You don't have any particular responsibilities. All that we ask of you is basically to somehow manage to secure your own food rations. Well, as far as managing Yamairi, Yoshie-san has command of that. You'd ask her for anything more on that."

"Yoshie?"

Tatsumi pointed to a black, towering house in the darkness.

"That house. ---Originally, they were called Murasko too, weren't they, come to think of it. She's in that house with the cellar. That's used as the community assembly hall you see, it's where Yoshie-san and the people helping Yoshie-san live. When you wake up at night, it'd be good to show your face there. If you do that, if there's anything to be done, they'll assign it to you."

Masao nodded.

"Otherwise how you spend your time is up to you. Do as you like. But at first you'll be working your hardest at hunting so I don't think you'll find you have much spare time. For a little while, when you go out hunting you're to move together with somebody. You still can't move on your own yet."

"I can decide who I attack?"

"It's not completely open, no. There's a few things to think about, as we do have long term goals and all. ---Was there somebody you wanted to attack?"

Masao nodded. "Someone I know."

"How old?"

"How old was he? A sophomore in highschool."

"If they're in high school we don't mind. We'll have to take certain measures to clean up after the humans who commute to school or work. What are they called---a friend of yours? Mutou Tamotsu, he was called?"

"Not him. Yuuki."

"So I see. ---But, that won't do."

"Why?"

"He's already being attacked. Another one of us is attacking him. Cutting in is no good. It gets harder for them to follow instructions, you see."

Masao felt irritation well up. "You said I could do what I wanted!"

"I also said there were conditions, didn't I? He's no good. In the first place, before you could even attack him, he'd already be dead. This is the third day or so? At that point he should be about there."

"Then let me give the finishing blow!"

"No go. Him, you see? He's a little unique. He needs to be handled delicately. I'm directly in charge of the attack on him. It's no good. You'll have to give up on him."

But that's, Masao said glaring at Tatsumi. Tatsumi looked coldly at Masao. "I told you, didn't I? You will not defy me."

Masao didn't reply, turning away.

Even though he'd been reborn as expected everything couldn't go Masao's way. That was irritating. Masao was told that he was "special" to this point but this was only in a negative sense, not a single person was treating him as if he were "special." And Natsuno was seen as "special." The boy who transferred in from the city. The

way he acted, the way he thought was different from the people of the village. His parents were like his friends, he was an only child. His grades were good, and he wasn't of a cooperative personality like Munetaka but even so he was popular. Even though he freely did whatever he felt like doing, the people around him treated him preciously, he was beloved. Without any worries, without meeting with any misfortune, living while looking down on thers--Yes, Masao knew how Natsuno was.

When looking at Natsuno, Masao couldn't not feel that he wasn't even a little bit "special." Despite the fact that Natsuno was younger, Masao had always felt that he was looking down on him for no reason.

---Even in all of this, he's so special?!

Masao was irritated. With a glance at the irritated Masao, Tatsumi went straight towards the house with the cellar. There were many figures about. Those people about bowed to him or fled in fear. He could tell that Tatsumi was a source of fear and awe here.

Tatsumi opened the glass door to the house. Looking from the outside, it didn't look like anything beyond a simple doorway to a dilapidated house but looking from the inside it was quite well lined. Beyond the clay floor, there was a door installed beyond the entryway frame, just like in the building Masao had come from. The only difference was that when the door opened, there was a light shining.

Masao blinked when the light pierced his eyes. Tatsumi gave a low laugh. "We shouldn't really need the light though, huh? But strangely everybody wants the light."

When he could see again, the color had returned. Dark floorboards, white walls. And sliding screens. The walls were neatly plastered. They must have been painted quite recently, they were white enough it hurt the eyes. Was it because of that, or maybe it was simply because of the light? The hallway that stretched on widely was adrift with something somehow comforting.

"It's an abandoned house but there's electricity."

"We have someone handy. They secretly wired it in from the aerial wiring."

They came out another door. They drew nearer to the sounds of people in conversation. Opening the sliding screens on the sides of the corridor, there were shadows of people in the rooms on both sides. They were comfortably at home around the low tables but it was strange. In the middle of what should have been a living room, a middle aged woman sat facing a desk. Noticing Masao and Tatsumi she rose up. With a rising smile she came out into the hallway.

"You've already come out? You were fast, weren't you!"

Tatsumi turned to face Masao.

"This is Yoshie-san. --I'll leave him to you, Yoshie-san. Also, about the lower house. The two inside are no good. It'd be good to take them out and bury them."

Yoshie nodded. "I'll have people do it. The leftovers from the lamb?"

"I left them beside them. Though I don't think she'll be any good either."

I see, Yoshie nodded. She turned her eyes to Masao and grinned sweetly. "I have to have a little talk with Tatsumi-san. You've already finished eating today, haven't you? Then, go and have a talk with somebody for a bit." Yoshie motioned to the tatami room. "You can go outside too but don't go too far from the buildings. I'll call for you when we're finished talking."

Masao nodded. The living room screen was closed. With nothing else to do he peeked into the tatami room, but getting the feeling that it'd be hard for someone new to enter on in, he went outside. Isolated by the two door frames, once outside of the house he couldn't see the light inside at all. The house he looked up at just looked like a dilapidated house. It was rather big for being

dilapidated, but that was all.

At the corner of the property three girls were standing around talking. There was a single child playing at their side. There were also a gathering of people before the shed. It was entirely too normal of a scene. As the buildings were dilapidated houses, only the lack of lamplights took away from the ordinariness of the scene. It was all to banal, and yet fundamentally strange. And so for that it was all the more strange feeling.

Masao timidly neared the shed. He noted a single man sitting down at the edge of the dried pond before the shed. The man noticed Masao and lifted his face that had been hung dejectedly. There were no lights but Masao would see what the other looked like.

"---Tohru-chan!"

Tohru rose up dumbfounded, and then turned to face away.

Masao hurried with a jog to Tohru's side. He thought he'd never see him again. He'd thought their literal eternal parting had come. But that wasn't the case.

"I see, Tohru-chan rose up too!" Masao smiled. But as for Tohru, without returning that smile, in fact looking as if in mourning, turned his face away.

"......What's with you?"

Masao asked, but Tohru only sighed. Burying his face in both hands, he spit out his words in a low voice.

"Why did even you have to rise up?!"

"...Looks like my rising up is bad to you, huh?"

Tohru looked up at Masao, his face distorting. "You, do you have any idea what's happened to you?"

"I know. I didn't die. But Tohru-chan's not happy for me, huh? It's like you think it'd be better if I'd died."

"That's not it."

That's not what I mean, Tohru rose as if to repeat it again. Keeping his face down and hidden from Masao, he dashed off from the property.

"What the hell... was that?" Masao watched Tohru head off angrily. "So, what, you don't like that I'm not dead?!"

Tohru didn't turn back. Watching him leave with a feeling of betrayal, there was suddenly a voice from nearby.

"You shouldn't worry about that."

When he turned around a young girl around his age was standing there. He remembered seeing that face before.

"You.... Shimizu, was it?"

"Yup. You, you're the Murasako rice shop's son, right?"

Masao nodded sulkily. Megumi pushed up her hair.

"Don't worry about that. That person's a little on edge right now. He regrets being reborn."

"Why?"

"Probably because of the prey he was assigned to. He was ordered to attack someone he knows, so now he's blaming himself."

"......Someone he knows?"

"Yup. Tatsumi-san's a bully. Since Tohru-chan's always been indecisive about attacking prey."

Now that Megumi mentioned it, he remembered that she used to have connections to the Mutou household in the past.

"Tatsumi-san has a tendency to bully those kinds of people. People who say they don't want to kill people? He'll go out of his

way to make them attack people they know. Attacking someone you know is, even without everything else a little complicated, it's different from the usual hunting. It feels like you're killing someone."

"It can't be helped! We can't stay alive anymore if we don't attack."

That's right, Megumi shrugged her shoulders. "It can't be helped but it makes you feel guilty. Tohru-chan hated killing people to start with, so he went out of his way to make him attack someone he knows to make him murder. In the village, a bad, inconvenient person to have around popped up, so it was set up to make both sides not want to do it. He's the kind of person who loves that kind of irony, Tatsumi-san is."

"An inconvenient person to have around?"

"---A hunter."

Masao tilted his head.

"It means somebody's realized we exist. If he'd have just cowered in his home, he ended up thinking he had to do something about the Shiki. So they're called a hunter. We can't have hunters. They can't be forgiven. They have to be regulated."

Masao furrowed his brows. "He... It can't be, Natsuno, was it?"

Megumi furrowed her brows. "Right. You know? ... You know don't you. You were coming and going from Tohru-chan's place all the time."

Masao nodded. So that's what it was, he thought with mixed feelings. Tohru was the one attacking Natsuno--for Tohru, that was a terrible cruel thing, he knew. But Natsuno himself probably woudln't care. Surely whether it was Tohru or anybody else for that matter he would calmly hunt them down, without a doubt. That was the kind of guy he was, Masao thought.

"They do assign prey to people...."

"They do. And if you pick someone there're times they tell you no too."

"Even though they said you could do what you wanted, right?"

Megumi's face scrunched. "That's right, really that's not true at all is it!" Looking back at Masao, Megumi let out a self-derisive smile. "Us? We're just pet dogs kept on hand."

"Tatsumi-san said that we were one of them."

"Lip service. This's a habitat for keeping their dogs. If you want to own yourself, you'll have to go to Kanemasa or it's no good."

"Kanemasa.....?"

"That's where the masters dwell."

That right, Masao said grinding his front teeth. His sharp teeth pierced his upper jaw and something bitter spread out. At the same time he felt a drunken, paralyzing sensation.

"You'd be better off stopping that."

Told as much, Masao looked back to Megumi.

"You're stabbing inside of your mouth aren't you? If you get in the habit of doing that, you won't be able to stop. There are even people who grind on the inside of their mouth. It's like getting drunk, you lose your sense of judgement and end up useless. Once that happens the one of 'us' you'll be is the dolls."

"The dolls?"

"People who have to work to eat. That's what Yoshie-san calls them. They're like slaves."

That right, Masao said, mouth slanting. The high he'd felt from rising up, from being one of them had no withered away without so much as a shadow remaining.

"There's nothing at all good about having Risen up. We're treated

like dogs, crammed into small little houses. Every night, we cross the mountain roads over a long ways to the village to go hunting. Even the hunting's ordered every step of the way."

Megumi let out a low sigh.

---This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

Megumi became the friend of the people from the mansion. The one to turn her into one of them was Kirishiki Chizuru. And yet Megumi's daily life was not one bit like those living in the mansion. Hiding in the mountains, pushing her way through the underbrush at nightfall, loitering around, eating a despicable meal. Away from human eyes, returning to the mountains, sleeping like the dead inside of a cramped building.

(I want out of the village.....)

But there was no way out anywhere. Megumi and the others were strictly monitored, there was no freedom to their movements. So, at least.

Megumi had wanted to make Natsuno into one of them. If at least Natsuno were here, how nice would it be? And yet even who she attacked had to be on Yoshie's instruction. When hunting, Megumi would frequently visit Natsuno's house but if Tatsumi and Yoshie knew about even that much she would probably be strictly scolded.

"Damn it... What the hell, just spitting out things that sound good! That bastard!"

"Better not talk like that. You're not to go against the people above. Especially not Tatsumi."

"That punk?" Hmph, Masao huffed through his nose.

"He'll dry you out. You'll be closed up in a room and not given any food."

"Is that all?"

"It's better not to think too light of it. I mean, one night, two

nights, you'll be fine without eating. But unlike people, our bodies now don't get limp and lifeless from hunger. Starvation once you've risen up isn't like when you were human. It's incredibly painful."

That can't be, Masao said looking at Megumi. Megumi gave a curt nod. Yup--It's painful, incredibly so.

"That's not all. He's pulled people outside while they're sleeping too. If sunlight touches our bodies, it'll burn and blister. Tatsumi's fine. He can be up in the daytime and walk around outside. The way you get burnt up, even if it does heal fast, it's like having your body set on fire. There's not a single person who's gone against Tatsumi after having that done to them."

"But that's... Then, isn't it like we really are their pet dogs?!"

"That's why I said it."

Masao's face scrunched. His open mouth even now looked ready to spit out further complaints but Megumi stopped him. Shecould see Tatsumi and Yoshie coming to them across the lot.

"----Good evening."

As Megumi called out, Tatsumi nodded. His eyes went straight to her as he approached.

"Right now, you're free it looks like?"

"I am free."

"Then I have a favor, if I could?"

"To attack somebody? Who is it?"

Tatsumi nodded. "There's a girl who's a friend of yours, a Tanaka Kaori, yes?"

Megumi's brows furrowed. "You don't mean... Attack Kaori?"

"Her father. If it's you, you'd know who her father is, rght?"

"I do know, but. ... Kaori, did she do something?"

Tatsumi smiled. "She's colluding with Yuuki-kun from the workshop."

Megumi's eyes gaped. "Yuuki....."

"Hand in hand, playing hunter together. That'll need to be punished."

Megumi clenched her fist. A darkness fell over her heart. She was threatened, her life as a captive was miserable. Even though that wasn't supposed to be the case. If she could take it all back, she'd want to return to being human right now. That'd be so many levels better. And then Kaori who was still human was snatching away what was Megumi's. She stayed in a warm house at night, taken care of by her parents, getting closer with Natsuno----.

"I'll do it," Megumi murmured.

Even though Megumi could never meet with or exchange words with Natsuno again.

sinnesspiel

5

"Mark my words, you'll regret this!"

Ikumi spat those words hatefully behind her with both hands on the asphault. Ohkawa Tomio looked down at Ikumi with his own spite bared, wordlessly taking the shutter door in hand. How she wanted to rise up and rush at Ohkawa to give him a kick, but with the store's lighting illuminating him from behind, Ohkawa looked all the more the part of a giant. All the more so to Ikumi who was small, splayed out on the roadway below. While she stewed in her indignation the shutter closed. That was a form of rejecting Ikumi more concretely than simply closing the door.

"What now! A person's telling you this out of kindness and this is how you react! And on top of that, I'm a customer!"

Ikumi stood up and gave the shutter a light kick. The liquor she'd drank at the Ohkawa liquor store's counter was pulling Ikumi's emotions high and low.

While drinking at the counter talk turned to to the suspicious events in the village. There were a lot of them in the village nowadays. Ikumi informed Old Man Nishida who likewise came to drink that it was Kanemasa, that it was Okiagari, but he dismissed it with a sneering laugh. Ohkawa openly belittled her and when he condemned her for going to the Shimizu Gardening's place it turned into a fight. No, it wasn't what could be called a fight at first. It was more like an exchange of sarcasms. Their tone was flippant but it was clear that the air was growing dangerous. Nishida who had remained until that point escaped in the heat of the confusion as Ohkawa drove Ikumi out. Ikumi herself didn't want to see Ohkawa's face any further but Ikumi had no money on her.

"How dare he, the cheapskate!" Ikumi spat towards the shutter. Ikumi did come here to drink sometimes but she'd never brought money for her drinks even once. If she talked to those at the counter, they'd eventually say "Why don't we drink together?" If she said that she didn't bring any money with her, somebody would usually treat her. Tonight was the same, with Old Man Nishida was the one to offer. It was his fault for leaving and forgetting to pay her portion.

This kind of thing had happened before now though. Ohkawa too knew how things went and had never taken money from Ikumi. He might have asked someone who said they'd treat her for it afterwards, but at any rate he likely found some way to break even. Ikumi wasn't a strong drinker to start with. When one said she drank it meant she had a single cup of either sake or shouchuu that she'd lap at throughout the night. So he'd never come after payment that aggressively until now.

"It's one cup of cheap booze! What's all this over! Treating people like some kind of thieves!"

She was pressed to pay and when she said it was Old Man Nishida's treat, she was called a mooch. Calling Ikumi's behavior insane by the end of it, she was literally put out of the shop.

"Don't like that I told about your uncle, do you?! Ain't it all true though! That uncle of yours turned into an Oni and is spreading misery all over! What'll you do if I leak that to the people of the village!"

Ikumi once more kicked the shutter. She could remain calm when she was divinely inspired and yet looked at with suspicion, but to be called a mooch, to be spoken about like a thief, she had never felt such disgrace.

"You won't make light of me! Mark my words, you'll regret this!"

Lately the villagers had been coming in now and again to consult with her. They would bow their heads low before Ikumi with their hands folded. With the charms Ikumi wrote out in hand they would say their thanks as they left. That engorged Ikumi's pride. She had

the feeling that she was a cut above the rest. This was not an attack on her decency, it was as if trying to bring her down; she could not forgive the affront of being called a mooch by Ohkawa.

As Ikumi once again kicked the shutter, Ohkawa Atsushi appeared from the alleyway beside the shop. A boy taking after his father, he glared as if threatening Ikumi. "The hell're you doin'?"

Hmph, Ikumi snorted. She felt some unease at Atsushi's young and large body but she wasn't about to show it. "That's not for you to know."

"You just kicked the shop's shutter now, didn't you?"

"And what of it! Your father was also violent towards me after all! What's fair is fair!"

"You think you can just do whatever the fuck you want?" Atsushi started lumbering forward. "All you do's come around drinking for free!"

Don't kid yourself, Ikumi wanted to say but as Atsushi's kick came her words became a screech.

"You're just a dried up old hag, get over yourself!"

"Stop! Stop it!" Ikumi huddled in the street where her body rolled. Atsushi laughed, further mocking her. Ikumi let out a scream but there was no sign of anybody on the night road. On the other side of the village road that the shop faced was a corner lot, on the other side was the town hall. No matter what happened, there was nobody to open a window, to come flying into the street to her aid. "Atsushi," came a voice from somewhere stopping her attacker, but that voice belonged to Ohkawa and that only wounded Ikumi's pride all the more.

"Don't you bother with her." Ohkawa's angry voice echoed from beyond the shutter. With that at last the kicking stopped. As Ikumi timidly raised her face suddenly water was forcefully assaulting her.

"You wanna drink, you can have all this you want," Atsushi laughed. Ikumi held up both hands trying to stop the spray of water

from the hose, chased off and leaving the place. Tears of vexation blurred her vision. Hearing Atsushi's loud laughter she turned the corner and, once she escaped to the village road she sobbed.

"Damn you... I'll remember this!" Ikumi said through grit teeth. With her soaked state, she felt nobody tried to help her, pathetic. "I'll show you just who's right---I'll have you know without a doubt in your mind who's important!"

sinnesspiel

6

"How'd it go with Tokujirou?" Seishin was asked as Toshio entered his bedroom, to which he shook his head.

"He seems against being hospitalized. Indeed he was talking as if reciting lines according to instructions."

And so, he was asked, to which he explained that while he didn't know if it would have an effect or not they'd moved his body into the altar room, spread incense and placed juzu beads on him, with sacred scriptures put at the porch entryway.

"You think that'll be able to repel them?"

"I don't know. ...The house is already open to the Shiki. The only room blocked off by scriptures is the drawing room, so we might not be able to depend on their effectiveness very much."

If they were going that far, transcribing sutras or mandala or the like on the sliding screens might have been effective but it wasn't as if they could try it. ---As he said that, Toshio gave a wry smile.

"You said it. It's not like we can act too crazy here. Even without all that they're already having a hard enough time trusting me in this situation, if I start doing anything eccentric on top of this, people who would've come won't anymore."

Seishin nodded.

"Other than having him say that he doesn't want to be hospitalized, it doesn't seem they've had Tokujirou-san do anything

else then? It's tough, making him refuse hospitalization. With everyone who lived in the same house with Tokujirou-san dying off like that, even though they've gone that far, if there were family there, they couldn't do anything to help."

"Aa....."

"By the way, you heard the talk about the Kirishiki family's Ebuchi-san opening up a clinic?"

No, Seishin said, eyes opening. "---They really are?"

"There was the convenience store in Shimo-Sotoba right? Seems they remodeled that into a clinic. But the question is for what?"

"You don't think it's as a base to spread the infection do you?"

Who knows, Toshio murmured. "In the first place--To start with, what made the bunch of them decide to move here to this village? Strangely enough I haven't even tried thinking about that until today. I was just thinking of it as they're here so they're here, but."

"Wasn't it you who said this place is prime for multiplying the Shiki's numbers?"

"Yeah. ...That's definitely right. Here even now we still bury the dead. Cremation'd be inconvenient for the Shiki. But how did the bunch of them know that the village still buries, I wonder, huh?"

Indeed, Seishin started to say back when he remembered that he himself had written something himself for publication. Indeed, it was in the spring of last year. Hadn't Sunako said that she had read that essay?

".....It can't be."

"Hm?"

Could it be that that was to blame for all of this? Cremation was inconvenient for the Shiki. Cremation was sure to be a major obstacle in increasing their numbers. Toshio may have been correct when he'd guessed that if Shiki existed, the reason they weren't

known to this day might have been entirely due to cremation.

--But if there was a place that buried, that would be where Shiki could multiply. Seishin's essay caught their attention. Seishin had memories of writing that the village even now did burials, that the graveyards were in the mountains.

"What's wrong?"

"It might be because of what I wrote."

Toshio gave a suspicious expression. "The village is surrounded by death, ---That one?"

Seishin nodded.

"But the village's name's not written anywhere in it, right?"

"If you read it, you'd know it's the village where the author lives. If you reference the author's CV, you'll basically know where it is, then if you take into account the geographic conditions and search a map, it'd be possibly to find it," Seishin lowered his eyes in shame. ".....She said that. The Kirishiki's daughter herself."

".....Oi."

"I think that's indeed what happened. She read the essay. She looked for where it is. Then---"

"Consulted someone related, or otherwise confirmed the real state of things. Before there was that talk about some kind of strange resort wasn't there? A surveyor came out, stayed at the Tokuda house for a while while snooping around here and there."

Indeed, Seishin murmured.

Toshio seemed to be further searching his memory.

"The results of investigating the real spot also showed it to be a favorable location. They made a plan to infiltrate the village. They

got ahold of the Kanemasa house---" Toshio started to say, then spitting out a sigh. "The predecessor of Kanemasa died suddenly. Without a word to anyone, he arbitrarily handed over the lot to Kirishiki-shi."

And that's where it all started, Seishin thought somberly. Perhaps taking on that same mood, Toshio's expression became all the more distressed.

"They're scrupulous. More than we'd been thinking. On our end we've only just now recognized that they exist, I mean we've confirmed that Nao-san and Shuuji-san aren't in their graves but we haven't found any way to repel them or to dam up the situation. While we're completely in a fog about all this, they've had everything accounted for and planned out for over a year beforehand now. ---But the thing is, why?"

"Why?"

"They calculated nifilstrating the village. But what's that for? The preparations took more than a year, It's not something they just thought up. There's got to be a goal to it, something to make a plan over, to put steadily into place. But what is that goal?"

"Like we'd said, isn't that to increase---"

"What'll they get propagating the species? Cremation's certainly staved off the Shiki from growing in number until now. So in a way, Sotoba might be a beneficial place for the Shiki as a species. But what would the Shiki themselves want to increase their numbers for? For humans, wanting to spread their influence is like second nature but to pointlessly increase their numbers just increases the number of carnivores and that's it. The bunch of them are eating up all the people in the village.

Indeed, Seishin murmured.

"And on top of that there's the Ebuchi clinic. That contamination point---if it's a point to increase their numbers, then they really might just be able to grow even faster than they are now. But even

now they're overdoing it. If people are dying off any more than they are now, somebody is definitely going to notice!"

"An undertaker....."

"Eh?"

"It seems we have an undertaker now. They were able to bring one in. The carpentry shop in Kami-Sotoba's been remodeled into a funeral home."

"Contracting burials?"

"Most likely."

Toshio groaned.

The Ebuchi Clinic, the Sotoba Funeral Home, both painted a similar picture. He couldn't think they were unrelated. If the Kirishiki family had a hand in the Sotoba Funeral Home, what was the goal? They would be the ones doing the funeral, doing the burials. One thing that could definitely be said to come from that would be lessening the work it'd take to dig out their rising allies. The pain of secretly digging up a grace was one that permeated deeply into Seishin's own body. They must have been continuing to do that. Somehow or another they were confirming whether or not the dead body beneath the tombstones would rise or not, then if they rose they were digging them out, then burying the grave back. If they could be the agents carrying out the burials, they would be able to take measures to lessen that hardship. It's also quickly decrease the odds of their current activities being found out. They would multiply faster. ---But it was just as Toshio said. What were they trying to do, increasing their numbers like this?

"They've got some kind of goal." Toshio's eyes were sharply concentrated. "They had a goal, that's why they scrupulously made a plan, one they're acting out. In the mean time, we can't even find out their plan."

Toshio remained silent after that. Seishin's back was tense in

anticipation of Toshio saying "That's why we need to hunt the Shiki," but fortunately he didn't say a thing.

In fact, Toshio himself wanted to say it but he knew his childhood friend's temperament, so he didn't dare say it. That wasn't all, saying they didn't know what the Shiki were thinking, to hunt them, was easy enough in word, but they still had to think of how to actually go about hunting them. They were exceedingly scrupulous planners. As if they were something that Toshio and Seishin could stop by haphazardly working together.

Seen off by Seishin who looked to him guiltily,Toshio spent time thinking in his own room. Toshio stood up. A shelt, a desk, he heard the sound of something like that falling. He left his own room towards the living room at the same time his mother was coming out in her night clothes down the hallway looking consterned.

"What was that noise? It sounds like something fell?"

"No clue," Toshio answered, peering into the nearby room. Not seeing anything out of the ordinary he went up to the second floor. The room closest to the stairway--formerly Toshio's own room---currently a room with a bed in it, for the married couple in pretext. When he opened the door, with a very strong whiff of cosmetics, he saw Kyouko's form fallen prostrate over the dresser.

"--Oi!" Toshio hurried in. Kyouko had fallen forward onto the dresser, gripping at the front chest portion of her night clothes. They must have been scattered out when she fell, the cosmetics bottles spilled onto the floor, several with the lids off spilling a stain onto the carpet.

"Toshio, what on earth?"

Moving before the shrill voiced Takae did, he turned her towards the light and peered at Kyouko's face. He could tell at a glance cyanosis was occurring. Her breathing was labored. Ensuring her airway was open, he observed her breathing. Her breaths were spontaneous. They were shallow, mixed with wheezing noises. ---She's fine, he breathed out faintly. It wasn't to the point where her condition was a race against time. It was within bounds where

Toshio could treat her himself.

"Mom, take her legs. We'll take her to the treatment room."

"I will do no such thing!"

Toshio shouted as his openly repugnant mother. "Carry her! You want her to die?!"

Takae's eyes widened with fright as she took Kyouko's legs with a resentful look. Sufferingly working her down the steps, once taken to the hospital portion of the building she was put onto a stretcher.

"Toshio... How is Kyouko-san?"

"I don't think it's serious but I can't say for sure. I'll treat her, so call Yasuyo-san for me. Tell her the situation and that I need her help ASAP."

Takae nodded, flustered. "Hashiguchi-san, yes?"

Watching Takae head to the main wing as if she were fleeing, Toshio looked down at his own wife. He'd noticed it when making sure her airway was open. There were two bite marks on the vein on her neck.

Why didn't he notice? Come to think of it, lately Kyouko had been strangely moderate. Whenever she came back her fights with Takae would be unending, but not this time. Almost as if she weren't here, confined to her room, Toshio himself lost sight of the fact that she was.

It was that. --And it was entering the later stages.

Why, he thought, wanting to blame himself. Why did he think that they would keep this up while avoiding them? However it was that they chose their victims, even just as a matter of probability, there was no way they should have gotten by safely. It wasn't strange at all that the harm would come to one of their own. No, it was in fact lucky that they'd gotten by safely this long.

But thinking that, Toshio glared into space. ---Was it really true

that they'd gotten by safely to this point?

"There's Tohru-kun....."

Yes, Mutou's son had of course been a victim of theirs. And then?

"....They got us."

Sudden resignations.

Shimoyama the X-Ray technician, and also Towada. What would you call them if not victims and losses?

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7

Tanaka drug his tired body along, leaving the town hall behind him. It was already past ten o'clock. It was an hour that would be called late night by the village's standards.

(There's something strange.....)

Tanaka had murmured that in his mind countless times at this precise time. At some point it'd become a habit.

Yes, strange. Tanaka turned to look behind him. The small branch office was brightly lit up. For the town hall to have lights on this late at night in itself was strange he thought.

Of course the teller window closed at five o'clock. It wasn't as if the office hours had changed. It was just that the number of employees at the town hall had decreased. Ishida from the Health Department had absconded, location unknown. There were others who had retired, those who had stopped and transferred too. For the open positions to be filled there were two new employees who had joined but both of them were temporary employees, and what's more they only came in at night.

To begin with, Tanaka thought. That had started just after Ishida had disappeared. The chief had resigned. His health suddenly failed him, he retired, and a successor to the chief had come. That new chief, Izumi he was called, had failing health and became bedridden just after they'd taken up the new position. Still ever absent from work, he had yet to appear again at his post. It'd already been ten days.

Without the chief's approval the town hall couldn't move. The assistant chief Kogawa had visited the new chief's home daily, at

least getting his stamp of approval on things but, perhaps he was sleeping during the daytime for it was tightly locked up and there was no answer. Since it seemed that at dinner time he would get up and come out, Kogawa went through the trouble of heading to the chief's house after all of the day's business was attended to. There just weren't enough people. The replacements that came came in once it was night. Since by the time they got the Chief's approval it was past evening, the amount of overtime was vigorously piling on. Besides Interacting with citizens who would come to the service window, everything else was killing time, in fact all of the real work was after the front window was closed---and this had been going on for five days now.

(And then there's the death certificates.....)

Tanaka as usual made copies of and amassed death certificates without knowing what to do with them. Ishida was gone. So he had no idea what he was supposed to do with them. It seemed like there was no need to make the copies anymore but somehow or another Tanaka couldn't stop. Sometimes he even thought of delivering them to Ozaki directly himself. But the Ozaki's Toshio had never asked for them or given such instructions, and whatever Ishida and Ozaki had been doing seemed to have been completely shelved once Ishida had absconded.

That in itself made him unease. This wasn't something that should have been just put on a shelf. Or did something change? Possibly the situation had gone beyond the branch office's hands, maybe it was seized by the Mizobe office. He could take the copies to the neighboring town and confirm it himself but he wasn't sure about that either. Even if on the surface they were merged with Mizobe, the feel that the village was the village was ever present within the villagers. Internal affairs were handled internally, without help from the outside. Of course he also thought that doing so would be an undue burden and nothing good would come of it, but Tanaka himself had that thought pattern within himself as well.

While thinking, shaking his head countless times, each time repeating once again that something was strange, Tanaka walked down the night road. On the small roads of the village with few street lights, there wasn't much sign of life. On top of it just being

that hour of the night, Tanaka had the feeling that the night had changed. The houses about had their lights off, still as death. It somehow gave an impression more like they were turning out the lights and holding their breath than like they were locked up for the night sleeping. The reason there was nobody passing by was neither because the people were sleeping nor because they were all gathered up together inside, it was simply that they were holed up in their houses afraid of the night, he thought. Something made him feel that way, something floating within the chilled night air.

It was a strange helplessness--something sinister. The night was scary, for what one remembered in the darkness was that one's own existance was fragile and weak. And the deaths that would inspire such feelings were continuing in this very village.

Tanaka quickly paced the road home. His own footsteps echoed his pace. It almost felt like he was being pursued. He couldn't wipe away that stagnant unease in his chest.

There was a break in the row of houses. Rice fields spread out basking in the moonlight. Several of them were abandoned, growing wild. Amongst those was one growing with rice plants left unharvested. Maybe the one who would have harvested it had transferred. But not a single notice had come in to the local office.

(Something is strange.)

He was certain of that but what it was that was strange he couldn't clearly display. This was an unusual situation, and Tanaka didn't have the words to express it. Like the abnormality of the streets---a similar feeling.

(Strange...)

Murmuring that for the upteenth time, Tanaka's stopped feet then hurried on again. It was then that he saw a human figure on the narrow roadway ahead.

Someone's out walking at this time? he thought. Nonchallantly continuing, they grew closer. When they were close enough to make out the other person, Tanaka's feet came to a halt. His mouth

popped open thoughtlessly.

"......Good evening."

The other's voice was easy going, coming closer at a page as if nothing were unusual at all. It was someone he knew, acting normally, without anything at all to be uneasy about, but on the other hand Tanaka was bewildered.

"......Megumi-chan?"

Megumi smiled. She smiled in greeting to him as always. Not a single thing had changed from how she was before. But something was strange---overwhelmingly so. The bewildered Tanaka could not grasp what it was that was strange. It felt like he'd met somebody he shouldn't have, but Megumi was his daughter's best friend. Born in the village, raised in the village. Her house was also nearby, so why shouldn't be run into her? No, maybe then there was a reason he shouldn't have met with her? In an instant of confusion, Tanaka tied it to Megumi's disappearance. Remembering that that had happened combined with the implacable thought that they shouldn't have met, and for that brief instant, he'd tied them together in an unfortunate mistake.

Tanaka came to a stop just the same, still shocked, raising his hand in a wave to megumi. "Everything okay now? Kaori was worried, you know."

Really, Megumi murmured. She came closer still. She came to a stop as if planning to stand and talk with him. She was close enough to see Tanaka breathing. Megumi abruptly looked downward. Tanaka, still bewildered, followed her gaze. Her arm went around his neck bent to look down. At the feel of that cold body temperature, Tanaka at last realized it.

--Megumi, she was dead.

When he tried to let out a scream and push her away, in that instant there was a pain in his neck. All the more he tried to push Megumi away but the arm twined around his neck wouldn't let loose. It's Megumi, a part of him thought with terror; it's Megumi, a

part of him thought with hesitation. Unable to hit her or kick her , a tender, drunken sensation came over him. Reality grew further away. The temperature, the smell, the sounds all grew further away, the feel of Megumi's arm, the lips pressing against his neck became everything. Real and unreal were reversed, the latter swallowing him up. With Tanaka stood on the pavement, mouth still gaping open. Awash in the moonlight, the abandoned fields rice heads rustled in the wind.

Megumi pulled away.

"......This is a dream."

Tanaka nodded. That's right, it was a dream. After all Megumi was dead.

"Revise the registers."

Tanaka frowned, still facing the wrong direction.

"You'll revise it. Nobody's died. All of them are mistakes. In this village there's no misfortune or anything at all happening."

Tanaka blinked, then nodded. Megumi unwrapped her arm from him.

"I'll come to see you again. This time at your house, Uncle. When I give the sign tapping at the window, let me in, okay?"

Saying that as she left, she was gone from his side, running off into the rice fields. Tanaka sat down on the spot. For a time he sat like that gazing up at the moon and then came to himself.

He was terribly dizzy. For a moment he lost his sense of self and felt something vague, then his back gave out and he sat down. That was all he was aware of.

--During that single moment of ambiguity, he thought he'd saw a dream.

Tanaka thought that, but it might have been his imagination. Standing up somehow or another, he hurried on the path home. He

was beat, he wanted to sleep. There was work to do tomorrow.

"……That's right," Tanaka murmured. "I have to correct those mistakes……"

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Cultural Notes

The ofuda note was put in the Notes for 3-4-4 as well, as ultimately the charms Ikumi sold were determined to need to be translated as ofuda rather than general charms, to differentiate and describe them as specific from the other supernatural objects described within the story in other chapters. Likewise, ofuda was put in the appropriate place in chapter 3-4-4 rather than just charm.

7-3
*She hid a **bag with a charm in it** and laid a **protective arrow** across the headboard. The **ofuda** charm she had was just one she had taken from their kitchen, so it was possible it didn't mean or do anything at all, but for the time being she plastered it do the window glass.*
Ofuda

- A piece of paper, cloth or plank of wood or metal with the name or symbol of a god and/or temple or shrine written on it. Said to be imbibed with a portion of a god or spirit (which can be divided indefinitely), they can be made with specialized blessings in mind, such as for luck in studying, safety in traveling, fertility, healthy childbirth, etc. They're meant to be put in the family shrine or altar but can also be placed elsewhere; for example,

it's common to have one in the kitchen to prevent house fires. It's customary to bring ofuda in to a temple to replace every year, to dispose of the old charm loaded with bad luck in a ritualistic and grateful manner rather than treating it like common trash. In a more cynical view, purchases of them are seen as a donation to the temple or shrine.

Sample image

from Wikimedia Commons (Kyouha Kenkyuu (Sect Research)).

Bag with a charm in it

- It's common for shrines and temples to sell charms in the form of small

paper or cardboard ofuda

tucked inside of an embossed or embroidered pouch. The charms are popular souvenirs sold at both Shinto Shrines and Buddhist Temples. The charm within the bag is said to take the bad luck for the carrier besides just bringing good luck and unlike ofuda installed either in the shrine or somewhere in the house, the bagged charms are kept on one's person or on or in one's bag, purse, wallet, etc. Like ofuda, it's customary to replace these once per year.

Sample image

of several of such charms from Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

Protective Arrow

(Hamaya; literally

exorcism arrow

) - A dull-tipped ceremonial arrow. Because the target of a

ceremonial arrow is said not to be a person or thing but noxious spiritual fumes, bad will or intent, or other intangible wickedness, it is said not to need a tip. They are said to be used in ancient exorcisms and are a common symbol. They are often given to newborn boys at their first new years festival or placed facing the northeast (where evil is most likely to come from) of a building during construction. Archery itself is a in some Japanese schools of archery more of a spiritual practice than a physical one, akin to a meditation ritual; the spiritual connotations of arrows are part of Japanese Buddhism as well as Shintoism and may be purchased at both temples and shrines.

7.5

*She had a single cup of either sake or **shouchuu**.*
Shouchuu

- A type of Japanese liquor made from distilling one or more ingredients, typically grain, potatoes, rice, or their koji molds, or possibly brown sugar. There are less common shochuu made with sesame or chestnuts. It's usually about 25% alcohol, weaker than whisky or vodka but stronger than wine or sake.

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Chapter 8
1

"--Kyouko-san's

what

?" Seishin's voiced raised without thinking, when the call came from Toshio. "And? How is she?"

Not good, Toshio said, his voice low. It was a tone of voice he knew well to be one blaming himself.

"It means we're not exceptions, in other words," Toshio said, voice tinged with self-derision. "You be careful too."

"Yeah... Then,"

"Do you really get it? This morning I called Shimoyama-san, you know."

"The X-ray technician?"

"Right. It was about the day after Tohru-kun's funeral I think, he quit, suddenly. So I got the idea to call him up but."

Seishin was startled.

"......He'd died. Last month on the ninth. Looks like it was acute heart failure."

"I see....."

"So it's not like they're letting us go by any means. Keep your guard up. For yourself and the people around you too."

I understand, Seishin answered and hanged up the phone.

Kyouko had an outbreak. And he said she was in the late stage too. He was taking measures and hospitalizing her but even if he stayed up watching her all night tonight, having already entered the later stages, they couldn't be sure if her condition would change or not.

(And Shimoyama-san.....)

Thinking that, Seishin suddenly realized.

".....Sumi-san."

The way he resigned was all too sudden indeed. He needed to make contact and see how he was doing. Even if he wasn't in time.

It was when he'd been thinking that. That was when the temple office door made a light thumping sound. When he turned about, an old women he didn't recognize was peering in at him. Seishin gave a light greeting. It was a face he must have seen somewhere but before he could place her in his memory the woman entered. Rather than glaring at him it was more like her hateful expression was growing worse, her small body coming to a stop before Seishin.

"I can't take it anymore!"

".....Uhm?"

"You, just what are you doing? This's why we can't count on organized religion! And you call yourself a monk?"

As he blinked, Mitsuo appeared in the temple office.

"Ikumi-san!"

At Mitsuo's surprised voice, Seishin remembered. This was Itou Ikumi from Mizuguchi. The eccentric weird---.

Ikumi stopped her foot loudly. "It can't be that you're going to try to tell me that you don't know what's really happening in this village, now are you?"

"Uhm.... I'm sorry, but."

"It's The Risen, isn't it, isn't it obvious!"

Seishin was at a loss for words.

"You all bury the dead bodies, don't you? It's your fault the dead are rising back up to us! The bunch of you all are worthless, no talent at all! All you think about is the money, can't nobody rest in peace! I know what's going on!"

"Ikumi-san, come now," Mitsuko tried to cut in but Ikumi pushed Mitsuo aside to cram herself between him and Seishin. She was a small woman, but she looked up so sharply at Seishin as if to jut her chin into his throat.

"Kanemasa's the ringleader. They're no good. Since that mess came in here the village's been cursed. The dead can't move on and are rising up, the misfortune's spreading out all over. Open your eyes already, how's about finally making yourself of some use to this village?"

"Ikumi-san, please wait a moment," Seishin raised his hands lightly to try to calm Ikumi but Ikumi smacked down those hands of his.

"Even when it's like this you're just going to watch are you? Well, to the lot of you, it's something to even be grateful for, all these dead people! Each funeral must have you laughing all the way to the bank, I bet. You sham of a monk!"

Mitsuo pulled Ikumi back. "Ikumi-san, what are you forcing yourself in here saying all of a sudden? Acting like you've got no manners, what is this about?"

"I'm only speaking the truth."

"Ikumi-san!"

Ikumi thrust a finger at Mitsuo. "Going to hit me? You were about to hit me weren't you? That's how the bunch of you do things. You pump the people of the village for donations, then kick back all

comfy with your money! I'm shocked he can even be a monk. Can't do a damn thing in the role. Junior Monk my ass! We talk like he's so great helping out others, but when push comes to shove, you tried to hang yourself up didn't you!"

Mitsuo went stiff. Seishin felt the color drain from his face. He unconsciously gripped at his wristwatch. --Yes, everybody in the village knew. Setting aside the accuracy of the smaller details. It was just that nobody said anything.

"Are the only things you're good for writing incomprehensible dime novels and being spoiled? If you're supposed to be a monk, you protest against Kanemasa and do something about this village right now!"

"That's enough out of you, you!"

"......Please stop, Mitsuo-san." Seishin stopped Mitsuo whose anger was showing. Whenhe looked, he could see Miwako standing at the entrance to the temple office, pale in the face.

Seishin turned his eyes to Ikumi and lightly bowed his head.

"......It may be as you say." Saying that, he offered Ikumi a seat. "Please have a seat. I am terribly sorry but could I please have you explain why it is The Risen and why it is Kanemasa?"

Ikumi snorted. "That's something even a child would know, isn't it? It's so obviously the Risen. It's Kanemasa, I mean, it's happened since that house'd been built."

"You cannot pass judgment on others for speculation."

"Speculation? Isn't it the truth? I know. You just don't want to do anything do you? You don't want to do a thing but put up your feet and take it easy."

"I have no intent to do that. However...."

"Enough excuses," Ikumi spit out flatly. "Do you plan to do something for the village or not?"

"Of course I do."

"Then come with me. We'll call out Kanemasa. I'll show you how it's done."

"Ikumi-san, you mustn't."

When Seishin said that, Ikumi narrowed her eyes. Seishin desperately searched for the right words.

He couldn't let Ikumi run wild. Blame based on speculation and prejudice would just have the opposite effect, turning the villagers against the idea. If Ikumi went screeching, then the more she shouted, the more the villagers would think the opposite of whatever she said. ---But, what Ikumi was saying was the truth. Her blame shot through the heart of the truth of the matter more accurately than Ikumi herself knew.

"Please calm down. It is certain that misfortune is continuing throughout the village but what connection does that have with Kirishiki-san? Will persecuting Kirishiki-san bring an end to the calamity, truthfully?"

I see, Ikumi said looking at Seishin with open disdain. "You're rotten beyond helping, aren't you?"

"I hear you when you are saying that it is The Risen Ikumi-san, but can we show that there are those who really have risen? Has somebody witnessed such a thing?"

"That's enough." Ikumi turned away. Regardless of Seishin's voice calling to top her, she left the temple office. Seishin tried to follow after but Mitsuo and Ikebe stopped him.

"You can't, Junior Monk. You can't get roped in with her."

"However,"

"If you get mixed in with her, they'll start saying and thinking weird things about you too. It'll be a mess if the temple gets thought of as the same as her."

"Mitsuo-san, that isn't a very proper way to..." Seishin tried to challenge, but Mitsuo shook his head with a stubborn expression.

"You can't. Junior Monk, please have some self-awareness. If the Junior Monk is thought of as the same as Ikumi-san, the villagers will support her and her action. The Junior Monk might not intend for such but you can't make light of the temple's influence."

"However,"

Seishin said as he and Mitsuo looked off in the direction Ikumi disappeared in.

"She has said that she is going to one-sidedly denounce Kanemasa. Once it's thought that the temple agrees with that, amongst the parishioners there will be those who will go along without thinking to denounce them together with her. Think about that, please, before you add any weight to her momentum."

Seishin was at a loss for words.

Ohtsuka Takeyuki and Hiroko's smiling faces came to mind as he considered that the enemies of the temple were the enemies of the village.

"......Yes."

Mitsuo breathed a sigh.

Ikumi took a glance at the mountain gate at spit disdainfully at it. Anyone and everyone were losing their sense of what was right and proper.Ikumi had come out of the kindness of her heart to show them the truth, but there wasn't even anybody listening to her. Far from it, Ikumi thought, unconsciously grasping the places on her body that ached. They blamed her, persecuted her.

Ikumi raised her eyes to look up at the western mountain. Beneath a seemingly empty sky, she could see a black roof poking out of the deep green of the mountainside.The anger that had been spiralling within Ikumi was spurred on ever higher by a destructive feeling. If the temple was going to keep their silence then it was time for Ikumi, even alone, to do something about Kanemasa. --Yes,

she would show them all, she would make it so that never again could they take her lightly.

Ikumi hurried down the stone steps, striking her hands against anything she could at the storefront of the town built about the bottom of the temple.

"It's Kanemasa! Hurry up and realize it now, all of you!"

Noticing several people gathered around the palaquin's platform on her way home from the contractor's firm, Yasumori Atsuko came to a stop.

What could this be, she murmured to herself, as Itou Ikumi stood before about six men and women crying out in a shrill voice.

"It's the Risen, you all have realized it too, haven't you?!"

For a moment, Atsuko was blindsided. Of Ikumi's words, only "The Risen" was clearly heard.

"My... What now?" Atsuko had tried to ask of the elderly forming the crowd but Atsuko herself knew what Ikumi was saying when she was talking about The Risen. It was "that" which had infiltrated the village. The something that was trying to kill off the people of the contracting firm. Almost like, a part of her had thought before, almost like Oni were about.

The old man in the group was Takemura Gohei. Takemhura Gohei shrugged his shoulders as if giving up. "She says the Kanemasa bunch are Risen."

"Well, my," Atsuko laughed. She could hear herself how forced her tone was. As if insulted by that tone, Ikumi's eyes stopped on Atsuko. Passing through the crowd she approached her.

"You, you're Maruyasu's Atsuko-san, yes?"

"Yes. Good evening," Atsuko said with a deliberate smile. "And who might you be?"

"You know, don't you? It's Oni. It's The Risen. Your place is being

haunted by Oni."

"Well dear me, such terrifying things you're saying."

"It's true though, isn't it? Just go ahead and tell me how many are left breathing there at the contractor's firm!"

That's, Atsuko said feeling her smile strain.

"Everyone at the contracting firm's been done in. Not just the contractors. Your place's Giichi-san's been haunted too. Once the contractors have all died out, next it'll be your place's turn. Will you be able to laugh then?"

"Please leave it at that, this kind of topic, it's unlucky..."

"Unlucky? It's the truth isn't it? You'll meet the same fate as the contractors. I know all about it. And next is going to be the lumbermill's turn. First will be the wife, then the son. Just like the contractors!"

"This isn't funny." Atsuko said cutting in and then turning away. Ikumi continued to spit out at her back. "Unless we kick out the bunch at Kanemasa, it's sure to happen! Why don't you get it?! Has a single person ever seen one of the Kanemasa bunch in the day time?!"

For an instant, Atsuko stopped, and then mentally closing up her ears she left.

sinnesspiel

2

Without realizing it Toshio stared at the telephone receiver.

"Now hold on, say it one more time. Seishin, what was that?"

I'm telling you, Seishin said, his voice a little quick as if hesitating to inform him. "Ikumi-san came to the temple. Kanemasa's the source, saying it's The Risen."

"That idiot---Her basis?"

"She insists that she knows. She looked like she planned to so to pressure Kanemasa."

"That's no joke!"

Toshio was speechless. This was the one thing he wanted to avoid. If a woman like Ikumi was the vanguard against him, then when she did it even if it was true it was less credible. If Ikumi went spreading it around, no matter how much they exhausted themselves of words trying to explain it, the villagers would be on guard against it.

Just when he'd been about to say 'anyway', there was a shrill voice heard in the waiting room. The buzz went all the way to the patients in the treatment rooms.

"……And now it starts here, it looks like. That old bag's in the mood to do street preaching."

Ikumi's words didn't carry into the room enough to be made out. But he could at least make out the words "Oni" and "The Risen." Hanging up the phone at once, Toshio stepped out. With a discolored expression Mutou came rushing to him.

"Doctor---"

"I hear it, loud as she's being."

Toshio hurried towards the waiting room. In the waiting room Ikumi was foaming at the mouth, running around in circles. As if in a daze or as if confused the patients watched her. Behind Ikumi were about three more people, faces looking to be burning with curiosity; looking at them, Toshio could feel his mood souring. ---It wasn't like they believed her. But there were people interested in seeing where it went.

"You all might think that you've caught a cold, but that isn't what it is! It's not a sickness you can catch and be cured from! Stop this now and open your eyes already! Hasn't everyone who's come to the hospital died and been carried up off into the mountains?!"

Toshio groaned. It was all the more piercing because it was true.

"Ikumi-san, if you come in stirring up weird agitations, that's a problem for us, you know?"

Ikumi turned about. "You've finally come out, you quack!"

"You can call me whatever you want but this is a hospital. I'm going to have to ask you to keep it quiet. Or is it that you don't have even that much common sense?"

"Which one of us's got no sense? Putting on a front like you're a doctor without even trying to cure no one. I'm a doctor, this's a hospital, if you're going to say that, why don't you show me a patient you've helped just a little!"

"I'll admit it myself there're patients I can't cure. But I'll need you to admit there's not a patient you can cure either."

"Hmph. I'll show you whether I can cure them or not. Kanemasa's the ringleader behind it all. Just knowing that, everyone'll be completely and cleanly cured. Nobody will have to see their families on the verge of death any longer!"

Toshio looked long and hard at Ikumi. Ikumi was being foolish

but she did precisely grasp the situation. This might be one way to handle the situation, he thought.

"……And? What are you saying we should do about Kanemasa? I hope you're not going to say that you can go in front of the house and chant a spell and make the Kanemasa house disappear."

A few of the patients laughed lightly. Ikumi glared at Toshio with eyes filled with frenzied anger. Toshio returned her look with a smile. Stirring up Ikumi was one way. This religious nut could storm Kanemasa. She would probably try to drag out the master to blame him. If she didn't, he would provoke her to do that. But the master of Kanemasa wouldn't come out. Even if, for example, Tatsumi came out, once Ikumi started her praying or whatever it'd probably cause some confusion. ---Yes, Ikumi had found the right angle. If this went well, they could show before the villager's very eyes proof that the bunch of them weren't normal.

"Sorry to have to tell you, but I think about the only things your prayers'll chase off are geckos and cockroaches."

"Don't make fun of what you don't even understand!"

"Listen, Ikumi-san? You're free to believe in whatever you want. But The Risen and Oni and all that are just made up, they're not real. It's impossible for something like that to make someone sick. If you're saying the bunch at Kanemasa are the ringleaders, what do you mean? Don't tell me you plan to say they're The Risen too?"

"They're Oni. They're Risen. They're making Oni."

"Now that'd be something. I met the young guy from Kanemasa but he didn't look dead to me. He looked more like a proper, normal human than you do in fact."

"He only looks like it. They're actually Oni. All of them, they're all the dead risen up but still dead."

"Can the dead go out walking around in the day time? It was daytime when I met Tatsumi-kun, but."

"There must be those who can. But isn't that young one the only

one walking around in the day time? The others in the bunch can't wander around in the day time you know, that's 'cause they're dead."

That's exactly right, Ikumi-san, Toshio murmured in his heart. "He didn't not have a shadow or anything, he was walking out in the daytime, a light hearted, friendly young man, he was. You're saying he's a dead man, but how do you plan to prove that? Going to wave a Gohei purifying wand around until his mask comes flying off and he shows his true self?"

"That's right!" Ikumi puffed out her chest.

"Well, if you say you wanna try it, go for it I guess. That'll definitely make it clear. Though I don't think Kirishiki-san has the time to deal with you, but hey."

"Whether he has the time or not, I'll just force him out. I'll make sure they learn the hard way that the people of this village aren't all careless idiots they can deceive so easily!"

"I see. So you're going to intrude on the Kirishiki's, drag their master out into a kangaroo court, in other words. Kirishiki-san'll have quite a calamity on his hands too."

When Toshio said that, Ikumi gave a knowing smile. "I'm saying what I think for the villager's sake. I'll go and drag them out, then show the truth to everyone there for you."

"In that case, don't stand around here nitpicking, can I ask you to hurry on and go there? I'd like to continue seeing my patients and all. If Kirishiki-san goes along with your practical joke, be sure and let me know. I'll take their pulse for you at least and tell you if they're dead or alive."

Ikumi glared at Toshio. Just you watch, she spit back at him as she turned to go. Maybe she had captured their interest, as two or so near the entrance followed after her. The other patients watched mouths agape as Ikumi and the others left. Toshio gave a smile to the patients who seemed torn on whether to follow or not.

"Go on after her if you're interested, keep an eye on Ikumi-san to make sure she doesn't do anything too crazy."

With that about three more stood up and went to the entryway.

Toshio watched them go with a thin smile.

sinnesspiel

3

Yuuki was in the workshop when he heard the uproar out front. Thinking it strange, he went out the front of the house; some ways up the road was quite the gathering of people.

".....What's this?" Azusa also stepped out of the workshop, waving her dye-wet hands. No idea, Yuuki murmured, starting towards it to try to see what was going on. Going up about two meters from the house, the road crossed with the hill up towards Kanemasa. At the heart of it all was a woman who appeared to be near sixty or so. Caught up in some fervor of hers, she was shouting about something. The people nearby were watching over her in amazement. Seeing Tashiro amongst their numbers, Yuuki called out to him.

"Tashiro-san, what is this fuss?"

"Aa," said Tashiro, looking towards the woman in the center of the mass with a wry smile. "It's Ikumi-san from the Itous. She's a bit of a dangerous person. She's on a holy roll you could say."

Yuuki looked to Ikumi without thinking on it. Indeed, he couldn't say that she didn't look like she was in a state they'd call touched in the head by God or spirits or some such.

"Somehow or another it seems like Kirishiki-san's place is the culprit it seems, the reason the deaths are continuing in the village."

Yuuki felt a sharp pain in his chest.The image of his son's figure sleeping back in the house rose to mind.

"It seems the people at Kirishiki-san's place are The Risen. She says they're Oni."

"That can't be....."

"Really, right? There are still people who believe in that kind of thing."

Tashiro laughed but that laugh was brighter than necessary, sounding somehow to ring hollow. Yuuki and Azusa both laughed as well but it echoed the same way as Tashiro's.

Ikumi shouted. Kanemasa was a nest of Oni. Ever since they came the village was cursed. The bunch at Kanemasa looked human but they were actually dead. She was going to prove that to them now, so everybody would drive Kanemasa out of the village. It'd cure the illness too, the hospital and the temple won't do anything, didn't know anything, didn't care to know anything, Ikumi was shouting hysterically.

"Ikumi-san herself seems more like she's gonna pass out. That old girl, she's been marching around the shopping district like this all along."

Yuuki gave a dry smile "But what of the people following behind Ikumi-san? Don't tell me they believe what---"

"There's no way they're taking it as the truth, is there?" Tashirou lightly shook his head. "I think they're just watching because it's interesting. That's at least why I'm along."

"That's....." He had the feeling that taking interest in all of this was a bit imprudent. Going along with Ikumi's words would just sound to the Kirishiki family themselves as spurring her on.

As if knowing what Yuuki was thinking, Tashiro spoke in a low voice. "I think it would be better to follow her. Somebody has to watch to make sure she doesn't do something terrible----I dunno how to put this but I dunno what she will or won't do."

I see, Yuuki murmured.

"Will you be going too?" Azusa asked, to which Yuuki nodded.

"Yeah..... Going to see might be better. Certainly, people like that

can be dangerous."

Of course, The Risen and the like couldn't be real. That kind of thing (protective arows.....) was just superstition. It was as Hirosawa had said, likely a metaphor for (the cross symbol) disease.

Yuuki's expression grew unconsciously stiff. Of course such things absolutely did not exist.

"Enough complaining and whining, let's go prove it once 'n for all!" came a hoot from the crowd.

"Cut it out already. If you push her, the old woman can't pull out and save face either."

"Wouldn't it be better to call the Junior Doctor from the Ozaki's? We'll need a doctor for this."

A voice burst out into laughter but just as Tashiro's and the Yuuki's had, their laughter sounded so cheerful as to be transparent. Even with the chatter and the jeering, a certain tension lingered amongst the group. Yuuki himself had a share of that.

Ikumi turned a menacing, frenzied glare to the men who had jeered out at her.

"You'll know right soon who's right!"

Saying that, Ikumi looked up the hill. The corners of her eyes rose as she started up the hill. The crowd split. Half of them stayed behind watching Ikumi climb up but half of them followed Ikumi up the hill. Somebody could be heard saying in a stiff voice that it might become serious, that they should contact the three pillars. Yuuki exchanged glances with Tashiro, then with steeled expressions followed the other people up the hill.

sinnesspiel

4

Ikumi scaled the hill in one go. She was pushed on by the determination that it would be none other than she herself who would show the village their salvation, she would no longer be made the fool of. The gates were closed tightly as they always seemed to be. Having a gate door like this to obstinately block out the outside world like this was in itself proof of something underhanded. The fence was high, bathing white in the sun's rays, with even an iron railing quite perfectly fitted along the top. Far from discouraging her, thinking who would go this far, she could only feel her conviction strengthening.

Ikumi knocked on the gate with the bow of a sacred tree held in her hand a few times when she noticed the intercom and pushed its button. After pushing it several time, a young voice was heard.

"I know what the bunch of you are. Get out of the village right now!"

A doubtful voice could be heard. Ikumi looked up at the gate and raised her voice.

"Even if you play dumb, you've been seen through. You might have been thinking that there were nothing but idiots who don't know what's what but that won't fly! It's all your guys' fault. If you want to say I'm wrong, come on out here and show me your defense!"

To Ikumi the situation was all too clear. It was since this house had come here, that's when the misfortune came to the village. A great many people were dead. Even more had left as if in fear but this too was obviously also because of this group kidnapping them. Nobody had noticed but Ikumi could see through it. That was

because Ikumi had been granted a special power. If one had such a power, then they would have the ability to drive out the lot from the mansions, and there was no doubt that just her coming to them like this would put the fear into them and send them running.

(Right about now I'm sure they're in a panic!)

Ikumi smiled. The dread must have been settling in on them right about now, there was no way out now that Ikumi had brought along the villagers to expose their evil before them, ---That was how Ikumi saw the present situation. The bunch inside would flee with their tails between their legs and the villagers would say their thanks to her. The temple and the Ozakis would both lose face. There would be nobody who could look down on Ikumi any longer.

Ikumi's mouth twisted as she hurled abuses towards the master of the house. No, to Ikumi herself, she was solding them, only crying out in a booming voice. And then the side service entrance opened.

The one who appeared as Tatsumi. Tatsumi was, to Ikumi's eyes, openly bearing his fright; to the villagers eyes, he was peeking with his body half out of the service door surveying the scene with confusion.

"Uhm..... I terribly beg all of your pardon, but what might this fuss be?"

"Shaddup!!" Ikumi waved the onbe. To Ikumi it looked like Tatsumi was showing disgust, taking a step as if to run away, but to the villagers it looked like he drew himself back out of fear of being hit in the face with the onbe. Tatsumi looked to Ikumi with eyes seeming to be filled with fear of something. Ikumi thought that what was in his eyes was a fear of her power but as for the many the villagers, they interpreted it as simply fear at having a run in with someone as strange as her.

"What might this be? Could one of you good people explain it in a way I might understand, please?"

Tatsumi looked out over the people gathered before the gate. Before anybody could answer, Ikumi shouted that he was an Oni. As

she firined off a rapid succession of accusations and questions, waving the onbe, Tatsumi fled back inside the side entrance. Ikumi tried to fallow after but the arm she managed to get a grip on shook her off and the door closed at the tip of her nose.

"Running away? Scared you good, did I!" Ikumi turned to face those behind her. Facing the villagers, she pointed towards the closed service entrance. "Look now, didn't he just run away? If there wasn't something shady, would he run? There's your proof!"

Yuuki scowled from within the crowd of people. Ikumi's frenzy brought on an unpleasant feeling. He surveyed the crowd thinking that somebody should stop her already but it didn't look as if anybody was there who had the least intent to stop her. Behind the gatherinf og people, he could see a number of people coming up the hill lead by a figure in a white coat. Did somebody really call the three pillars?

That was when Toshio who was at the front of the group entered the mob. The sound of the gate opening caused Yuuki to turn back to face it. It wasn't the service entrance, it was the front gate this time that opened. As the door was pulled open, the form revealed was Kirishiki Seishirou.

Ikumi stepped back as if faintly recoiling, while the surrounding pack of villagers themselves took about two steps back. There was a faint opening about Seishirou. Approaching upon the white concrete, basking in the rays of the fall sunshine, Seishirou stood casting down a black shadow. He looked over the mass gathered before the gate with an exceedingly calm face.

"What is this ruckus?"

Seishirou's voice echoed low, very clear. With no trace of timidness to be felt, majestic---a voice in which one could feel resolution, determination. "Suddenly intruding before a house in a great mob, bawling out as if you've gone mad, is that a custom in this village?"

"Gone mad, you say?!" Ikumi's shrill voice rose, starting towards Seishirou. She waved the onbe giving a glottal prayer chant but the

target himself, Seishirou, merely furrowed his brows and gazed at Ikumi was all the more disdainful eyes.

"Let the evil be gone, let the sworn enemy be gone, let the---"

Taking hold of Ikumi's hand as she shouted such, Seishirou took the onbe from her.

"I'd like to have this foolishness come to an end now if you would."

"You plan to go against me?!"

Seishirou did not answer Ikumi's cry. He looked out over the people surrounding.

"From what I can see, what we have here is a gathering of well established adults who should have their wits about them but. Are you good folk here to support this sort of behavior? Or are you merely spectators?" Saying as much, Seishirou took notice of one within the crowd of people. "The Doctor of the Ozakis appears to be here as well, does he? ... I must say, I am shocked."

Receiving Seishirou's glace, Toshio could feel a cold sweat forming. The time was just past high noon. The sun was all but directly above, and there wasn't a single cloud in the autumn skies. The sun light pouring down was downright radiant, shining on his neatly coiffed hair and his majestic stature.

(That..... Shouldn't be)

Without noticing Toshio's confusion, Ikumi's shrill voice rang out cryptically. She took something out from her bosom and flung it at him. At that moment the scent of perfume flowed through, so it was likely incense powder. Seishirou brushed it off as if it were indeed a terrible burden but he didn't show any signs of recoiling. Even as Ikumi rang out a chant resembling the Heart Sutra, he only showed open disdain rather than the expected response.

"A little birdie has told me of the misfortunes continuing throughout the village but what are you trying to say we have to do with it? If you want to suspect something, might I suggest you

suspect poisoning or an epidemic?"

With a nod, Toshio cut through the crowds.

"Precisely. .....my apologies for this, Kirishiki-san. Please don't think that we're here as spectators. Some of us were called saying that it was becoming dangerous, so we came running."

"Don't you misrepresent the situation!" Ikumi cut in. "That young'un loiters around in the day time too doesn't he? Don't think just because someone comes out in the day that the story'll fly that you're not Oni!" Saying that Ikumi turned to face Seishirou. "If you're going to say you're not afraid of me, bring out your wife and daughter too why don't you!"

"I humbly refuse," Seishirou said flatly. "My wife and daughter's conditions are fragile you see. They suffer with an incurable disease. Even coming to this village was for their recuperation. I'm terribly sorry but I myself suspect an epidemic. It appears some sort of epidemic is spreading through the village, so I simply can't allow direct contact to be had with all of you. I do not mean to say that you all are unclean but my wife and daughter have compromised immune systems. Even a mild, trifling infection could become fatal." Seishirou said, looking out over the gathered people. "There are circumstances requiring the family remain shut away in the house. Perhaps there are those who cannot grasp this? This is entirely like a witch hunt. Or must all outsiders, regardless of whether they are vulnerable and have unique circumstances, be subjected to such treatment in this village?"

There was a voice that tried to insist against it, to make an excuse. The crowd of people grew timid, retreating, beginning to disperse. Ikumi's voice only grew more shrill but several men took hold of her from behind beginning to drag her off.

"Your displeasure's understandable," Toshio said bowing his head to hide his own dismay. "There are a few different superstitious folk tales in the village. Most people understand that they're superstitions but there are some obstinate believers too. That's what you'd expect from a small, backwards village, as they'd say, so could you find it in your heart to forgive us?"

Seishirou wordlessly nodded.

"There's a folk tale in the village of something called The Risen. The dead rise up from their graves, an intermediary between life and death they're thought of. Ikumi-san is suspecting that you good people are The Risen."

"Do I look dead to you?"

"You don't, do you?" Toshio said, lightly licking his lips. May I go ahead and confirm it? If I do as much, I think that even Ikumi-san will accept it."

Seishirou's face showed no signs of changing. "Please do."

Toshio nodded and took Seishirou's hand. Feeling for his pulse, he easily found a regular pulse beat. Touching his neck he likewise found a normal beat. Peering at his face, he used his hand to form a shade over Seishirou's eyes. In response to that his pupils did slightly enlarge. Moving his hand away they shrunk down. He couldn't spot any abnormality.

"We can all be at ease now can't we?" Toshio was aware himself of a faint emptiness to his voice. "It seems his pulse, his breathing and his body temperature are all normal. Of course he also has pupillary reflexes. No matter what standard you use, it seems there's no way that a doctor could issue a death certificate."

Thank you, Seishirou smiled. Toshio turned to look at Ikumi with a bleak feeling.

"Ikumi-san, Kirishiki-shi is not a dead man. He is human just like you. You get it now right?"

Held back by several men, Ikumi grit her teeth and glared at Toshio. She seemed like she was going to say something, but the words didn't actually come. Toshio turned back to Seishirou.

"Ikumi-san is likely satisfied with this as well. I'm sorry for the trouble."

No bother, Seishirou answered, looking out over the people

before the gate who had troubled him and turning. The gates once again closed. Nobody here could think to condemn such a behavior that seemed to reject the outer world.

"Yuuki-san, let's go."

Urged by Tashiro, Yuuki returned to himself. Ikumi was shouting something to the men holding her, but even so she was being brought down the hill. The crowd broke apart and started to flow down the hill.

--He himself had come to keep an eye on Ikumi, it wasn't as if he by any means believed the ridiculous things Ikumi spouted.

Even saying that to himself, he couldn't help feeling a certain tinge of something resembling self-loathing. He felt he'd been complicit in a foolish behavior. ---He felt he'd looked like an utter fool

Seishirou was right to be angry, he felt. All of the people who had gathered before the gate must have been thought to more or less come believing in Ikumi's rash remarks. If he were being honest, could Yuuki himself say he didn't believe it at all? If he thought about it coolly, Ikumi was just a woman touched in the head. That woman flung brash accusations and stormed the Kirishiki house but if Kirishiki had ignored her, if he'd taken it seriously, if he'd felt pressed and contacted the police to handle it, this would have been a comedic case file, he realized. None the less, Yuuki had thought that it would be a disaster at the time. Looking back now, he didn't know why he had thought that way.

(There's no way, I'd thought....)

There was no way that The Risen could exist. If he really believed that, he should have tagged along on Ikumi's antics with a smile. Did he believe it somewhere in his heart, was that the reason he couldn't do that? If so it was all the more reason he'd felt it was important to think about it with a clear head and put an end to it.

(..... That might be true.)

Yuuki thought. Of his laid out son, of the protective arrow at his pillow side. Did that not indicate something of this nature? Even while knowing something like that could never happen, Yuuki might not have been able to help thinking, could it not even happen to his own son?

(.....How stupid.)

It really was foolish. Waving his hand at Tashiro, as he headed home he felt a self-derisive smile on his face. Really, it was so stupid he couldn't do anything but smile.

While Toshio went with the flow down the hill, he bit back something bitter. Everyone around him was laughing. Half of that was to hide their shame, half in self-derision as well. And possibly--Toshio thought. They were thinking "Did you see that?" in regards to Ikumi. Of course The Risen didn't exist, that was obvious, they laughed, and a part of himself too wanted to laugh and believe as much.

(But, Ikumi-san was right.....)

She was too severe, he thought. Now if Toshio himself likewise said "It's The Risen," his credibility would be about zero. That wasn't all, Ikumi's actions ruined the chance for the bunch in the village to think that it might be The Risen or that it might be vampires on their own. Now nobody was going to think that and look into it seriously.

(.....Why?)

Why could Seishirou come outside, no matter how he looked at it, he wasn't dead. Or were Shiki that kind of living being in the first place? If so then why had they only come out at night until now? Why were their victims deaths concentrated around dawn?

Caught up in thought as he returned to the hospital, Seishin was waiting in the waiting room.

".....Yo."

"Ikumi-san?"

"Who knows. Dragged off by someone I guess. They probably brought her back home."

Seishin's voice was low as he asked "How did it go?" Toshio shook his head.

"Kirishiki-shi came out and that was the end of it."

Seishin's eyes widened. "That can't be."

"But he did come out. He didn't seem to mind the sun especially. Incense powder, chants, onbe, all had no effect. Just in case I took his pulse too but his pulse and all that was normal. He was in a hell of a bad mood. Is this a village custom, he said, even."

"Then, was it our misunderstanding?"

"No way," Toshio spit out lowly. "It just means it's not like the folktale. There's Tatsumi's case too. It's possible there's something special about them. But the ring leader's in the Kirishiki family. That's the one thing there's no mistake about."

Seishin looked down. "Is that really true after all? That we're not under some major misconception in our guesses?"

"We're not. Thinking about what we've confirmed to this point, there shouldn't be any major mistakes."

"But, it isn't as if anything's been proven..."

Toshio threw himself down on the sofa. "I thought Ikumi-san'd give us some proof. So why was that punk able to..."

Come out in the middle of the day? If he could do that, why hadn't he come out even once during the day before? About to say that, Toshio realized he'd made a verbal slip. When he promptly looked up at Seishin, Seishin's color had changed.

"That. What did you mean by that?"

Ah shit, he thought, but it was too late.

"Ikumi-san will give us proof? Don't tell me that you used Ikumi-san for that reason?"

"No, that's not what I..."

"Ritsuko-san had said that Ikumi-san had come to the hospital. That she had been addressing the patients in the waiting room for a while. She said that you turned her away but don't tell me that you..."

Toshio sat up. His confession came with a sigh.

"......Yeah. I stirred her up just a little bit. I thought Ikumi-san might give us some proof."

"Why would you do such a thing?"

"Why? Do you think Ikumi-san can be persuaded to stop? That person completely believes it. Whether I stirred her up a little or not, sooner or later, she was obviously going to go up that hill to call out the bunch at the Kirishiki household. Either way she couldn't be stopped. So I made use of it."

"Why---You did such a...."

Toshio glared at Seishin. "Sorry to say, I don't care that much about appearances. I get it, you're a clean and tidy guy. You probably see me as using dirty means. But is this the time to be talking about things like that? The bunch of them are using way more meticulously dirty means than the likes of me!"

"Toshio, that kind of..."

"Kirishiki's master came out in the middle of the day. He'd been able to move in the daylight from the start. None the less, he never showed himself during the daytime until today. We were suckered in. He never showed himself just for today. They're meticulous. Absurdly meticulous."

Seishin was silent but by his expression it was clearly not because he accepted what Toshio was saying.

"Probably, the bunch in the village had some vague doubts about the Kirishiki family. A hunch doesn't need any basis. None the less, that was straight up denied. The people in the village are probably laughing at their own doubts. They're all probably believing less and less in the Shiki. They'll drop their guard and bury their dead. ---Do you know what the point of that is?"

"You brought it on." Seishin's voice was low. "You, without thinking of the consequences, brought on this result by spurring Ikumi-san on. ---Am I wrong?"

"I'll admit it was imprudent. They were a cut above me. They're more meticulous than I thought, they've made appropriate preparations for their actions. And if they can even act in the daytime, if magic doesn't have any effect on them, they have even fewer weaknesses than we thought. You could even say they're multiplying by the hour. If you want to disparage me I'll take it but what we need to do right now is think of what to do from here."

Seishin said nothing. He kept his eyes down with a severe expression, turning away. As the waiting room door opened, he could hear a deep sigh. Toshio saw him off, hanging his head.

"..... Do whatever you want."

sinnesspiel

5

From the second story window Seishirou looked down at the hill road before the house numerous times. Even after the crowd of people had dispersed, quite a few villagers had stopped to gaze up at the house but they too broke off into groups of three to five, with those few remaining disappearing as well. The western sun shone over the peaceful scene of the now empty road. With a faint smile he turned away from the window. heading deeper down the hallway, his feet carried him to the back of the house towards the innermost room.

Opening the evergreen oak door in the hallway, there was one more inward opening door in the way. Entering into the roughly one meter space between the first and second door, closing the hallway side door, he then opened the inner door.

Inside was a true darkness. Once the door was closed he felt around its side to turn on the light. Inside was a two part master bedroom. A window set facing north and the bedroom door were both blocked by two-way doors, completely stopping up the light. Seishirou took a seat in the armchair before the fireplace and looked up at the clock on the mantlepiece. Just a bit longer until sunset.

A bit after sunset, the bedroom door opened. Seishirou smiled.

"Morning."

Sunako who stepped out looked to Seishirou dubiously.

"Were you waiting on me? It wasn't a peaceful day then was it?"

"Mm. It wasn't. Today, there was a strange old woman who'd

come."

Sunako took a seat in one of the armchairs and began to do up her hair.

"----Who?"

"Now what was she called? She seemed a bit of a strange person. She made a big fuss that we were Oni. She incited the lot from the village to storm the house."

"That really isn't a peaceful story at all is it?"

Seishirou laughed lowly. "They said we were The Risen. That our only showing ourselves at night was proof."

"And then?"

Seishirou smiled at the little girl as she tilted her head.

"She wanted to drive us out. I went out. But she was waving about an onbe or something or another. It was completely unthinkable to her that it would have no effect. At the very end, the Doctor of the Ozaki's had come to take my pulse."

Sunako's small voice rose in a laugh. "Doctor Ozaki, I'm sure he was surprised!"

"He indeed seemed to be. That face, I do somewhat wish I could have shown it to you."

With a giggle Sunako looked up at Seishirou.

"And so? What will we do?"

"What was the brave elderly lady named?"

"Itou, Ikumi I think it was. I think that she lives in Mizuguchi. If I recall she lives with her forty or so year old daughter. She's a stray element, isn't she?"

Yes, Sunako nodded.

"---Shall I kill her?"

"That wouldn't be very wise. The death of somebody who openly opposed us would probably be seen as strange by the villagers too don't you think?"

"Likely so."

Sunako looked up at the clock and rose. Turning to face the window directly behind her, she opened the heavy evergreen door. Forcing open the long and narrow double doors, in the alcove within was a window with two curtains over it. Opening the curtains, she then opened the window. Opening yet another wooden door outside of it, outside of the window the scene was died madder red and indigo. Outdoors the rusty afterglow lingered but they were well into the domain of the night. The cold breeze blew in with the twilight.

"......Yes. How about having her go on a trip, perhaps?"

Seishirou nodded. "A one way trip, of course."

"Yes." Sunako smiled and turned around. "Surely she feared our revenge. That's why she left the village. She doesn't believe. Even if somebody else affirmed it, she cannot think of us as harmless. But if she cannot find allies here, she will flee to safer territories."

"---And her daughter?"

"Is that her only family."

"It seems so."

"Then, wouldn't she surely soon call her daughter to her? They are their only daughter and mother respectively, after all."

Seishirou nodded and rose.

"I'll make the arrangements. ---Anything more?"

No, Sunako shook her head lightly. "Thank you, Seishirou. I really think it a thing to be thankful for that there are those who

understand as you do."

Seishirou turned about with a smile. "Today I felt like even I had been of use. It was worth holding off on going out during the day time, wasn't it?"

"You are always doing so very much good for us."

I'm glad to hear it, Seishirou murmured as he stepped out of the room then stopped. "Come to think of it, the clinic's interior seems to be furnished now. The external may take a bit more time but we can begin medical examinations now."

"That was quick wasn't it. --And the funeral parlor?"

"That too can begin business at any time. Hayami-san said that he would come here tonight."

"I see," Sunako murmured. She called out to Seishirou who moved to leave again. "……Say? Today, when the elderly woman had come, the Doctor of the Ozakis had come running hadn't he?"

"Yes he did. He said that somebody had called him it seems, but what of it?"

"Was Dr. Ozaki the only one who came?"

At Sunako's questions, Seishirou gave a soft, knowing smile.

"While there were many spectators gathered, it did not seen that Muroi-san was amongst them."

I see, Sunako murmured. Without saying anythung further, Seishirou left the room. Sunako once again went to the window and turned her eyes to the mountain.

The nearby northern mountain rose high and dark. Halfway up she could see a few number of lights. She tried casually letting her gaze shift from the side of the mountain to the west, to where the western mountain crossed with the northern one but it was all too naturally dark. Sunako knelt on the floor, placing her elbows on the window frame. Setting her face atop her arms she gazed at the

northern mountain.

"……Right about now you're hearing of it, aren't you?"

Probably from Toshio, or possibly someone in the parish. And then soon enough now he would hear of Itou Ikumi's disappearance. Probably by now he knew that something was happening.

"It can't be helped, Muroi-san. From the start, everything had already been decided..."

sinnesspiel

6

Yuuki had been caught in a deep melancholy since departing as if pulled along by the tide of people receding down the hill until returning home.

It was foolish. ---Truly foolish. There's no way The Risen could exist. Thinking himself outrageously foolish for having believed if even an instant, he couldn't even work up the energy to mock himself.

He sat in the living room at wits end with the disgust he felt in himself. When the doorbell rang, Yuuki realized he was in the living room without the lights on.

"----Coming!"

When he came to the entryway, there were the Tanaka siblings. Yuuki's brows furrowed. It felt like he was confronting a physical incarnation of the imbecilic nature that nested in this village.

"Uhm..... How is Yuuki-san?"

"He's sleeping now, sorry to say." Yuuki's own voice was, he would have to admit, curt. Kaori looked towards her little brother as if troubled. The little brother spoke all the more cheekily.

"We came to pay a sick visit. Do you think that we could see Onii-chan's face to see how he is at least?"

Yuuki wavered but eventually nodded. He didn't have any doubt that the siblings were worried. The two went towards Natsuno's room. Yuuki followed behind them. When they entered Natsuno's room, Natsuno was asleep. His breathing was wild. He'd had a terrible fever since that morning. His turn for the worse was plain

to see.

The siblings neared the bed looking worried, then they flickered their glances to Yuuki. Yuuki didn't move from where he was. He stared fixedly at the siblings, watching them, then called out: "That's enough isn't it? As you can see, he's not well."

Kaori bit her lip, and Akira hesitated as he looked between Natsuno and Yuuki.

"I'm thinking of having him hospitalized. Natsuno needs a doctor's touch after all. So if you two do come tomorrow, I don't think Natsuno will be here."

Suddenly Kaori looked up. She looked as if she were blaming him.

"Go on home."

"Uhm---We have something to talk about with Yuuki-san....With Natsuno-san."

"Natsuno isn't in any condition to be able to talk with you."

"But..... Uhm."

"Go home, would you? Also, I'd like it if you'd stop bringing weird things into this room."

Akira rose up. Kaori grasped her little brother's arm to stop him. They'd noticed when they came in that the things they'd placed yesterday were gone. And that they'd been moved to the trashcan. And also that Natsuno's conditioning was worsening. Even the two of them could tell just by looking. They couldn't save Natsuno. --- Yuuki had gotten in the way of that.

"Uhm..... We," Kaori started to say but what exactly to say beyond that she didn't know. How could she appeal to him in a way that would make him understand? This was so important and yet. She didn't think that she could tell him in a way that he would listen. ---Not based on what she saw in the trash can.

Kaori mustered her courage. This person didn't understand. She had the feeling they were the only ones who understood.

"Uhm, I would like to be allowed to nurse him. Could you allow us to stay by his side tonight? We will not be a burden. I beg of you."

"There's no reason for you to do that, is there?" Yuuki's answer was quite blunt. "Having novices nurse him wouldn't do any good. Could you stop talking nonsense and just go already, please?"

Yuuki's objection was merciless, enough to make one think it outright malicious. Having gathered and put her courage to work only to have it knocked down left Kaori without any further words. Yuuki prodded her with a "Let's go now," as she hung her head, and so she rose up without any other options. Pulling Akira's hand, Akira curled his body away.

"......No, I'm staying."

"Akira....."

"Nii-chan's in bad shape isn't he? I'm not going. I'm staying with Nii-chan."

"That's not necessary," Yuuki said as if to attack him, causing Akira to cower. Against a trembling Akira, Yuuki grew all the more ruthless. "I'm only going to say it one more time. You're a nuisance. Please. Leave."

Akira hung his head and stood. Kaori pulled at his hand, leaving Natsuno's room as if fleeing. They went down the hallway and flew out the entryway.

"What the hell is with him..." Akira turned to face the house. "Nii-chan's sick! He doesn't know a damned thing!"

"......Akira."

"If Nii-chan dies, it's his fault. He's gonna be the reason Nii-chan dies!"

Akira's feet moved faster as if fleeing when Kaori gripped his arm. "Akira, wait."

"It's not my problem anymore!"

"Hold on, wait. .....You're not serious about that, right? You don't mean that Yuuki-san isn't your problem, that he can just die, do you?"

Akira grit his teeth. "I mean there's nothing else we can do is there?! The arrow you put down, Nee-chan, the rosary I put out were gone. He threw them out. That's why Nii-chan's getting worse. I'm sure they came last night. At this rate Nii-chan's gonna get killed."

"That's right. That's why we have to do something."

"Something? What're you saying we can do? He told us to leave didn't he? We're a nuisance. There's not anything left we can do is there?"

Kaori hung her head.

"Nee-chan, you begged him to let us nurse him but he said he didn't need it. He won't let us leave anything to protect him and we can't even stay beside him to do it ourselves!"

"Wait....." Kaori remembered. "I don't think it's that we can't."

Akira blinked, with a face looking like even now he was about to cry.

"That's right. If we can't be in the house, we'll do it from the outside. Megumi went to look into Yuuki-san's room a lot. It faces the back yard. She said she could see into the bedroom window from the forest."

".....Kaori."

"If we go there, we can watch from the outside. If we put them outside, the charms might not be found, too."

"We're gonna do it? Go outside and wait at night?"

"That's right. ……Are you scared?"

Akira's mouth puckered. "I'm not scared of nothing!"

Kaori nodded. Akira was mad. And it was the same for her. Yuuki was so obstinate it made her angry. That was why for now they could forget their terror. It wasn't that they weren't afraid. But if Yuuki was going to be like that, they had the feeling that no matter what it took, they would have to protect him.

"Let's go, Kaori. Where is that?"

Yuuki watched the two of them leave and stood hesitating for a while before the phone.

He thought about calling Toshio. He could ask for an examination or possibly even ask him how the situation was going. ---But, he thought. The day Natsuno had gotten worse was obviously different from the situation that Toshio had spoken about.

……It was different, was what Yuuki thought. So he hadn't contacted Toshio then. Nor the next day. He had taken Natsuno's words at face value and had thought of it as a lack of sleep. It had only been since yesterday that he'd started to think it strange.

But that couldn't be, he thought. To be thinking it was that now after all of this. If Toshio examined him he could know for sure but Yuuki hesitated. What if it were that? Nevermind if he'd asked before, at this point Yuuki had wasted three whole days. The thing in question reached its conclusion within a few days. So there was no point in having a doctor see him if it wasn't after the immediate outbreak. What had toshio been saying? Hadn't he said that if three or four days had passed by the time he was contacted he couldn't do anything? Yuuki had passed that three day window.

No, even so, he thought. Even if it did outbreak, there was no cure. Even if Toshio had seen them the day of the outbreak, once he broke out, there was no way to save Natsuno. To this point there hadn't been a single instance of any one person being saved.

He thought about calling him. He thought about how it would be useless even if he did. On the one hand it was worth at least confirming it, but he also thought about what confirming it would come to. Within another two days he'd know for better or for worse.

While still wavering on whether to call or not, once more, he thought. Once more he went to see how his son was doing. That might have helped him make up his mind, and so he started towards Natsuno's room, stepping into the light of the lamp turned on in the room.

He made sounds of shallow, superficial breathing. There was a faint wheezing in his throat. His pallor was as poor as ever. His lips were cracked with fever.

Wavering again over what to do, that was when Yuuki heard a noise outside the window. It was in the yard outside of Natsuno's window. The mountain's edge drew near to the garden almost too thin to be a walkway. There was no reason for a person to go through it, no reason for a noise to be made, but indead he heard the sounds of something in the underbrush.

Yuuki held his breath and listened. The sun was already setting. The inside of the room was dark, without much light of the dusk coming through the window. There was the faint sound of the grasses parting, and a whispering voice. He thought he heard a shushing voice. Somebody was outside of the window. More than two people.

Yuuki quietly approached the windowside, listening closely and then opened the curtain. He must not have had time to suddenly hide himself; immediately within the thicket, he caught sight of a stiff, half-bent Akira. Hurriedly bent down at his side, he could see half of the girl's face.

Yuuki opened the window. "What are you two doing?" Yuuki's irritation was audible. "---Come out now."

Slowly the girl stood up, her little brother sulkily following suit.

"What are you doing there? Just what were you planning to do?"

The two looked down. They didn't answer.

"Leave Natsuno alone would you? I told you before. Or do I have to call your parents and ask them to stop you before you understand?"

Yuuki's tone was cold, unforgiving. It was a reflection of Yuuki's own internal frustrations but of course Akira and Kaori couldn't know that. Akira scowled at the window. Just beyond Yuuki who was in the way was Natsuno, but Akira and Kaori couldn't get in to him. It was like they were the vampires, he thought.

"Please go home."

When told that, akira ran up to the window. "If you leave him alone like this, it's gonna become a disaster!"

Surprised by Akira's shouting, Yuuki's eyes widened.

"Nii-chan, he's gonna die. We're the only ones who know how to save him!"

Yuuki was startled. "That's more than enough of that kind of talk."

"It's true. But you're the one getting in the way!"

Akira was vexed. More at his own powerlessness than anything. Why weren't they adults? Why wouldn't the adults take anything Akira said seriously? Just because he was a kid, he was belittled and treated like he had nothing worth paying attention to to say. Even though Akira himself was the one who knew better than any of them.

"---It's The Risen! If you don't do something, Nii-chan's gonna be killed!"

Yuuki's mouth popped open, and then his face warped into a smile. The animosity dissipated, and the meekness of that expression was not forgivable. Akira knew that face. It was the proof of an adult determining that Akira was a child and taking in

his words as simply childish nonsense. It wasn't very "adult" to scold a child over every little thing, and really wasn't it just precious in a way, said the expression looking down at him.

"I see," Yuuki smiled. "I'm thankful Akira-kun's so worried about my son, but since he's not going to be killed, go on home now."

"No! It's true!"

"You don't know what happened afterwards do you?"

Akira blinked. He didn't know what he was talking about.

"....Afterwards?"

Yuuki smiled. To Yuuki the situation was clear. This child had heard Itou Ikumi's accusations. Possibly from somebody else. Being a child he took them at face value and came running. No, he might have heard of it before this too. With the way Ikumi was acting she was probably screaming "It's The Risen!" for a while now.

"It's not like that, Akira-kun. That was Ikumi-san's misunderstanding. The people of the Kirishiki family aren't The Risen or vampires or anythin like that. The doctor himself confirmed it."

Akira's mouth gaped open.

"The Risen don't exist. You've been hearing about them since you were little, so you might have thought maybe they are real, but this isn't any kind of case like that."

"But---But still!"

"Kirishiki-san came out to the gates in broad daylight. He even had a shadow. Ikumi-san swung an onbe and chanted spells at him but they didn't hurt him at all. --Well, he did seem annoyed," Yuuki said with a laugh. "The doctor from the Ozaki clinic took his pulse and confirmed he's a full human being. It was really funny, actually." With a sarcastic laugh, Yuuki urged the two. "I really am thankful that the two of you are worried for Natsuno. But this isn't a case of The Risen. In a way it's even more scary. When Natsuno gets

better, I'll be sure to have him call you, if he doesn't I'll call you myself, so the two of you go on home. I'm sorry for making you worry for him." Yuuki said and then closed the window.

"……Akira."

Kaori put a hand on his shoulder and urged him. With a face on the verge of tears Akira looked up at his sister.

"……That bastard wouldn't let me get a word in!" His voice shook. "About Megumi, about Yasuyuki nii-chan."

"I know."

"He never planned to listen from the start, not to a word I said. He was making a face like he knew what I was gonna say, even though he didn't know at all, and he wouldn't let me talk……!"

The multiple forms of anger and the multiple forms of outrage Akira felt mingled together. Akira despaired himself that he was a child.

Nodding "I know," Kaori burst out crying. Taking Kaori's hand and returning towards the slope, Akira cried too. If only he could at least take one last look at Natsuno's face, he thought all the while.

For a while, Yuuki looked out the window. Natsuno faintly opened his eyes and looked up at Yuuki. He seemed to have an honest pity in his eyes but whether that was towards Akira or whether whether it overlapped with Akira and was towards himself he didn't know.

He just knew that the strong sadness at the forefront of his consciousness was slipping, unable to keep hold of his thoughts as they continued to slip away.

sinnesspiel

7

"Good evening?"

Tama poked her face into the entryway as the man called out. When she opened the door, a middle aged man's faced poked in.

"I wonder if Ikumi-san might be here?"

The moment she was asked that, Tamae drew back. Her mother had caused that commotion today. She knew because those in the area came by telling her as if doing her some great favor by warning her. This was bound to be a grievance related to that.

Would you put a stop to her, your mother's a nut, get out of this village---Tamae had always feared that at some point, somebody would likely come and say that to her.

"Mother is out. ...What business do you have with her?"

"She's out? Would you know where she's gone?"

Tamae didn't recognize the face of the man who was asking. It seemed like he was a villager but he was at least not likely to be somebody from the neighborhood.

"I don't know," Tamae murmured, looking at the man. "If you're making a complaint, save it for my Mother please. It's only a bother for me."
The man's eyes widened. "Complaint? No, no, I didn't really come to place any complaints. I just want to talk with Ikumi-san a bit."
Tamae stared at the man after he spoke.
"……I wonder if I could wait inside?"
"That would be a problem. Please leave." Tamae's clenched fist

shivered. The man seemed disappointed but she was far from caring about that. "Something is wrong with my Mother. She's not well. Please leave her alone."
"A daughter can't say things like that. If Ikumi-san heard that, you'd make her cry!"
"Leave me alone!" Tamae spat out. She took the door in her hand and slammed it firmly shut. And then pitiful tears began to flow. Ever since Tamae was little everything revolved around "that mother of hers." The people around her made fun of her, kept their distance, keeping Tamae isolated ever since she was a child without her having any say in the matter at all. The surrounding people's gossip, their warnings done as if for her sake, their eyes turned towards her with interest and disdain---even though none of it was Tamae's fault. It was her own mother. She knew that. A lone mother and lone daughter, it wasn't as if she could abandon her, nor did she want to abandon her. But she at least wanted to be given a break from it all and to live a quiet life. With everyone about making fun of it, her mother had grown furious. This fanned on the people around them who went even further with it. She wanted them to stop fussing over the two of them. She didn't wish for anything more than that. Because if the people around them could just let it be, Ikumi herself wouldn't take such extreme measures either.
"Say, Itou-san?"
There was the sound of a knock on the door. Go away, Tamae shouted. He didn't want him to blame her mother, much less stir her up.
(Everyone, just forget about us.)
"Itou-san, isn't there some kind of misunderstanding? I didn't come to attack your mother or anything. C'mon."
"Please leave."
"Don't be like that. I camebecause I have business with your mother. Do you have any right as her daughter to drive me away? Anyway, if I have to shout like this, I can't help if it draws indecent attention. I'll listen to your complaints too, so please, couldn't you let me inside?"
Tamae couldn't bear it any longer and opened the door. She pushed at the man whose hand was raised to knock again on the door.
"I told you to leave!"
"Now, now. There's no need to be violent..."

"Please stop bothering us!"
Tamae was trying to drive him away, and the visitor there was struggling with her. That was the scene that Ikumi had returned in the middle of.
With a bag in one hand Ikumi had returned to the side of the house when she's heard Tamae's irritated voice. It was the third time Tamae had screamed "Leave!" The man was trying to calm her down from that.
She didn't know what was going on but while Tamae was trying to drive him away it was clear the man was resisting. Ikumi stuck her hand into the bag of incense and stepped out.
"Could you please not do strange things to people's daughters?"
She threw a puff of incense at the two who turned in surprise to face her. Tamae raised her hands and turned her face away but the man had a strange reaction. With a panicked voice he jumped back, as if he were set on fire, smacking at his body to brush it off. Ikumi understood.
"……You."
She threw the last of the incense towards him. The man let out a strange scream, twisting his body, waving his hands as if to brush it off.
"What did you come to do? You disperse this instant. Impure beings like yourself won't come near this house!"
Ikumi took out her juzu beads. The man desperately writhed, rushing out onto the night roads. Watching the man run off brushing the remains off of his body, Ikumi was quite satisfied.
--Retribution.
As expected Ikumi had hit a sore spot on them. That was why the lot of them had come to get revenge. No doubt about it.
"He must have come to see me."
"Yes…… That's right."
As I thought, Ikumi murmured.
"Listen, Tamae. Even if a customer comes for me, you're absolutely not to let them into the house, all right? Especially night time visitors." As she spoke, Tatsumi and Seishirou's faces floated to mind. The brazen ones from the bunch who wandered about in the daytime. "No, even during the day. If somebody comes by while I'm not in, you can't let them in. You shouldn't talk to them either. Close yourself up in the house and ignore them. Got it?"
Tamae tilted her head, bewildered, and then nodded.

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8

He didn't know why.

He had been a heretic on the hill. God's favor was with his little brother, though the splendor that he was never did turn to look back at him. Not only the splendor worthy of being God's incarnation himself, but neither did the sage nor the neighbors look twice at him. No, it wasn't as if they cast him out by any means. It was just, just as his little brother was such a natural splendor, he naturally could not close the gap harmoniously.

He tried to conduct himself in the same manner as his little brother, the same as the others--perhaps to be even more piously than they--and he longed to be like him. None the less the distance between he and the world was laid out.

As to when that started even he did not know. Almost as if it were congenital, like some naturally born trait, as if since before the time his memory could reach that the relationship between himself and the world had been decided upon.

If he extended a helping hand to his unfortunate neighbors, the fact that he was stretching his hand out to them wounded them. If he withheld his compassion and rebuked them, the unfortunate neighbors would be driven further, and if he encouraged them he felt only further isolated and left behind. He knew that he must have been making some sort of mistake but he could not tell what or where that mistake was.

In his own way he thought quite earnestly, tried to fill in that gap between himself and the world but with his effort driving him in nothing but circles, his aimlessness only deepened that gap.

The world was in beauteous harmony. He yearned for such harmony but the moment he entered into it all of that harmony was put to waste. That was all the more reason he had to be alone. He was isolated in a corner of the green fields. The neighbors held pity for he who was in isolated, stretched out their hands to him to return to their harmony but because

abiding by those welcoming hands would always and inevitably lead to their disturbance, at some point he would end up refusing even when that hand was stretched out to him. When he did, when he refused their aid, it was true that his isolated existence would continue but the neighbors would chastise him for that too.
The only one to see his existence as glad, to tell him it was all right to be was his little brother. His little brother's kindness, towards the world, towards him, was the normal course of operations. All adored his little brother as a man of compassion and character, and his little brother's existence brought for all, himself included, a blessed happiness.
Yes, indeed he was a blessing. As long as he at least had him then indeed he was satisfied, and as long as his little brother was there, or when when he waved his hand when he called to him, he was greatly satisfied.
Most of the time.
There were times when laying eyes on his little brother bore irritation. It wasn't towards his little brother by any means. When looking upon the tender shepherd within the green fields, he certainly did see him as a fond sight. Like a work of art upon a scroll, it calmed him terribly. None the less, the truth was there were rare times when looking over that scene that he became aware of himself.
His little brother stood in the field, and regardless of how such a thing brought him ease, when he became aware of himself watching over his little brother standing in the fields, he would inevitably fall into a dark and somber mood. His brother who lived in such a beautiful picture, himself who could never be within that picture, that separation decisively battered him.
The more beautiful that picture of his little brother standing in the fields was, the more harsh the result of that blow. He, absolutely unable to enter into the frame, could only be all too aware of that unscratched jewel of harmony. No, it was even worse than that. More than feeling the pleasure at that splendor, he had to be aware of himself as one who could never be within that in order to be accepted or denied.

Seishin stopped his pen.

It was wrong to blame Toshio. No matter how extreme it appeared, Toshio was acting as he thought best for the villagers. Without knowing what was right, afraid to take action and confining himself indoors, Seishin shouldn't have been qualified to criticize Toshio.

Just the same, Seishin couldn't excuse Toshio's conduct. When he became aware of his own incapacity, Seishin felt himself as a heretic.

(I know.....)

Seishin looked down over the manuscript paper.

(I'm the one who's wrong.)

Toshio was alone in the waiting room overwhelmed with bitterness.

He knew Seishin's temperament. While annoyed with himself for running his mouth carelessly, at the same time he was also irritated with himself for taking that action that could only be called "imprudent" in the first place. He was vexed that they took the upper hand. Unable to avoid that irritation with himself, he couldn't help but worry about Seishin who had mercilessly blamed him for it.

"You think we can get by without playing dirty?"

Snorting in his heart that he'd been like that since he was a kid, Toshio left the waiting room. Entering the nurse's station on the second floor, he slammed the door roughly behind him. Now in the room Setsuko had been in until just the other day, Kyouko slept. Setsuko's death, Kyouko's outbreak, anything and everything was thought of as proof of his incompetence, burning in his chest.

While being overwhelmed by so many things, Toshio returned to the recovery room. Looking at the monitor, he could tell she was showing an irregular pulse. Kyouko wasn't doing well. He was treating her but she was already in the irreversible stages.

Is she gonna die, Toshio wondered. He'd foolishly overlooked the

initial symptoms, and because of his failure to be careful with his own family his wife was going to die. While he would admit it was an outraeous situation, while he felt disgraced, he did not feel sentimental about losing his wife.

(I'm, not lamenting losing Kyouko.)

In the end he was this kind of person, he realized. Toshio couldn't call to mind why he'd chosen Kyouko as his wife in the first place. Even if he tried to remember the time between their meeting and marriage, it was lacking in any raw emotion on his part. Looking back on it now, he realized that it was nothing more than him not wanting his parents to choose a wife for him. He knew his own position. He had to return to the village and be his father's successor. And in doing so he could not leave the village without an Ozaki. So before his mother and father could force him into anything, he picked out a suitable woman with his own hand. He couldn't help coming to the conclusion that that was all that it had been.

"So it was mutual, huh....."

Toshio wore a bitter smile as he sat at Kyouko's bedside. It was Kyouko herself who said that as long as they were a doctor anyone would do. The first time they'd come back to the village, she'd said that when saying she didn't want to be holed up in the village.

As if to blame him, the heart rate monitor started to show signs of disturbance. He tried to treat it all the same but there wasn't much else that could be done for her. It'd have been best to report that she was in critical condition to her family.

Letting out a breath as he arranged the things at her bedside, Toshio stared off into empty space.

Kyouko was going to die, most likely. Even if it could be put off for a while, she probably wouldn't ever recover. Would the dead Kyouko revive?

For a while, Toshio looked down at his wife's face with her eyes closed, answering his own question. He tried thinking over the

possibilities.

(In the end, this is the kinda guy I am……)

I'll never be like Seishin.

Murmuring that in his heart to himself, Toshio cleaned up her bedside area. He unfastened the juzu beads from his wife's wrist.

"Kyouko, I'm asking you." Toshio had never, until now, asked his wife from his heart for anything. This would be his first and last request. "……Resurrect for me."

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Cultural Notes

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Onbe

- A wand made up of a rod with two zig-zagged usually white paper streamers (called

shide

) used by Shinto priests or other religious professionals in blessings or purification rituals.

Example image

from, appropriately enough, the

Encyclopedia of Shinto.

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For a bit, Yuuki sat at his son's bedside, time lapsing as he sat dumbfounded, before at last rising up and calling for Azusa. He had Azusa who was in much the same dumbfounded daze make the call. Toshio who had rushed over once called looked at Yuuki with a terribly complicated expression and then issued a death certificate reading blood poisoning due to renal failure. Yuuki got the feeling that Toshio was blaming him. He couldn't help thinking he was on the verge of asking why he didn't bring him to see a doctor sooner.

"He was doing well. When he fell. He even told a joke, he laughed. He was doing very well. So---"

Is that so, was all Toshio said.

"……So what will you do?"

Yuuki blinked.

"You'll have to bury your son won't you? In these cases the village directly calls the temple and the mourning crew manager but is there a certain undertaker anyplace you'd like to use?"

Yuuki hung his head. On the one hand there was the traditional method of calling on an undertaker to handle the burial but on the other hand there was the custom of the village he had moved to.

"……What would be best?"

"I'd think you would want to go through with cremation, wouldn't you? Yuuki-san had been originally living in a place where that was the custom."

Yuuki felt his back stiffen. If he cremated him, there really was no turning back, he had thought, strangely. But there was "no going back" about anything. Natsuno's dead body was already confirmed. Nobody could change the results of that. Yuuki had accepted as

much gravely and yet he couldn't help but think that cremating him would be accepting his death, welcoming it to cross the gap into his ordinary factual reality.

"The Mourning Crew, please."

"But, you know."

"My son… I want him to be buried here as a member of the village. He'd found a home here. I want to send him off as a part of the village. I think that is also what Natsuno wants."

"……Is that so," Toshio sighed deeply. "In that case, I will be the one to call the manager. What about the temple?"

Yuuki thought for a while when Toshio spoke. "You aren't really parishioners but if you will be burying him in the village, you will need to rent a plot from the temple. Yuuki-san, you do not have a plot. Of course it isn't as if you can't seek and request one, by all means, but it might be best to consider how extremely complicated the process of getting permission can be. Already for the last ten years or so there haven't been any new grave lots approved."

"A plot needs to be approved?"

"You need the prefectural governor's approval. It'd be faster to rely on the temple than to take the legal formalities of buying one."

"Then---Please do."

Toshio nodded. "Then, I'll be the one to contact the temple. The Caretaker Manager will see to the rest of things."

Yes, Yuuki nodded. Yuuki remained like that sitting at his son's bedside. He couldn't think of what to do next. After some time had lapsed since Toshio left, a voice came from the entryway. Not feeling like getting up, the source of the voice let themselves in and came looking for Yuuki.

"Yuuk-san---Ah." The door opened. When Yuuki turned around, there were Hirosawa and Mutou.

"I was called by Mutou-san."

Mutou nodded to what Hirosawa said. Toshio had called him. Told that he would probably need help, he took the day off from work and invited Hirosawa who lived in the same Mourning Crew territory before hurrying over.

Yuuki sat in place lethargic, his son laid out on the bed. A father who had lost his son. It revived a painful struggle still all too raw in Mutou himself.

After watching Mutou pat Yuuki's back, nodding several times, Hirosawa stood up. He decided it was best to leave Yuuki to Mutou. There was likely a certain understanding between fellow fathers who had lost a child. There was nothing he could say as one with no such shared experience. ---And moreover, Hirosawa thought as he left the room. The preparations for the funeral had to be done. Before long the manager would likely come but even before that there were a great number of things to be done.

Walking through the house he found Azusa in the living room. Azusa too seemed defenseless, sitting there in the room.

"Uhm, I'm sorry to disturb you at a time like this, but do you have a Family Shrine? If so, we will have to close it up with calligraphy paper, but."

"No," Azusa answered despondently.

"Does Natsuno-kun have a yukata or something like a night dress?"

Too this too she gave an absent minded no. Hirosawa looked down on Azusa sympathetically, then began to rifle through the house himself, saying that he would be using their phone. He called his house and asked his wife to prepare the bare minimums, then sought the bathroom for washing and preparing the corpse.

Azusa was left alone in the living room as Hirosawa left. Sitting fixedly, she didn't know why she was bracing herself so much for something, and so she tried to understand the reason for her

tension.

It took a bit of time for her to remember that her son was dead. The word "dead" had floated into Azusa's gapingly empty thoughts, isolated from any emotion or thoughts to accompany it.

"……I'll have to call."

That thought floated up utterly separately from the thought of the word "dead." Azusa looked to the clock and picked up the phone. She called the school.

After about ten calls, at last a clerk answered, she spoke in an inorganic voice.

"Tenth grader Koide---No, this is Yuuki's mother, but."

Ah, the clerk answered. The clerk remembered Natsuno, whose parents weren't in the same family register, quite well.

Azusa's mouth opened. Without even needing to think of the words they slipped out. She was aware of her own voice seeming strange.

"My son will be transferring. We'll be moving away from here very suddenly. My son will be coming with me. I will send the paper for his dropping out in a few days."

The clerk tried to say something but it didn't reach Azusa's ears. She said what she was supposed to say, so with no further concern she hung up the phone. For a while she just stared into space.

She was very worn, and it all lacked a sense of reality.

While having such a feeling, Azusa moved her hand. She scratched at her elbow hidden beneath her sleeve. There were two small marks, like bug bites, and they were very itchy.

sinnesspiel

2

Seishin received notice of Natsuno's death before the morning Buddhist service. He informed Koike that he'd wanted to be buried in the village, that he wanted to enter the parish and use a plot of theirs.

"Yuuki-san wants the same thing as Mutou-san, he wants him to be buried after all. I will be leaving that to you."

"I do not mind but," Seishin said, still holding the receiver as he looked to the blackboard where he wrote it down. "To be honest…. Koike-san, there are already many appointments the day after tomorrow."

"The day after---Ah, tomorrow's Tomobiki, isn't it?"

"There are also many on the 17th. Should we ask for the help of a nearby temple---if it must be us no matter what, it will have to be done on the 18th, or otherwise tomorrow, but."

"No matter what the case putting it off until the 18th is over the limit," Koike said as he thinking and stopping himself. "The 18th is the 18th, we might end up with emergency tasks then too. Yuuki's will have to be tomorrow. I'm very sorry to do with to Yuuki but if he can't swallow it down, then…"

Yes, Seishin nodded. Writing down the schedule, he went to the main temple building to request Mitsuo to prepare a gravesite. Somebody stopped Seishin as he was returning after finishing the services.

"Say…… Junior Monk?"

When he turned around, he saw that it was Chiyo from the general store. The pious old woman who had attended services every morning without fail after sweeping the mountain entrance bowed her head formally to him.

"These days, it seems very busy, doesn't it?"

Quite, Seishin said in a vague and prevaricated answer, Chiyo staring into fixedly at his face as he did so as if to ask him something.

"……Everything is well, isn't it?"

That short and simple question from the normally silent old woman pricked at Seishin's heart. Within those words were Chiyo's worry and hope.

Chiyo having said all that she had wanted to say gazed up at Seishin fixedly awaiting his words.

"……Yes."

When Seishin did at last finally answer, she once again deeply bowed her head. With a slow gait she stepped out of the temple. She left behind only Seishin with his painful lie.

The village was impending. To this extent. So many were dying that the temple couldn't keep up. Indeed it was just as Toshio had said, perhaps this was no time to care about frivolities such as how something was done. Somebody had to stop this calamity. It was unforgivable to let this be.

Toshio stirring on Ikumi was clearly imprudent, he thought. But he couldn't blame Toshio for being impatient. To start with, he was not angry with Toshio for the fact that his actions had made the situation worse. He was angry with what he had done in and of itself.

It wasn't as if he didn't understand Toshio's feelings. He knew Toshio's personality. Egging on Ikumi was very Toshio, and if he were in Toshio's shoes, he might have even thought it the appropriate thing to do. That end result was unprecedented. So he

couldn't even begin to blame him.

(And yet……)

He couldn't see where Toshio was coming from. He knew that Toshio was trying to save the village, but what was it that made him think as much? To put it into simple terms, was it not justice, was it not compassionate towards the villagers? In that, where did making use of Ikumi come into play?

He wasn't picky as long as it had the result he wanted---he saw Toshio's behavior, which could be described thusly, as terribly egoistic. If that were the case then he should have acted egoistic from the very start. He should have said who cares about the villagers, should have refused any further troubles, should have just excused himself from any further troubles. If he had done that, Seishin too would have understood and consented.

---And, that went for himself.

If he wanted to save the village, he shouldn't have questioned the means of that end. There wasn't enough of a village left for that. Indeed this was a choice with only two options. If he wanted to save the village, they needed to exterminate the Shiki, unless they were exterminated the calamity would not stop. None the less, there was most certainly a part of him bothered by such a method. Seishin did not understand that part of himself.

In his hands, nothing moved as it normally should. He would turn the flywheel to fetch water but as soon as he touched it the mechanism itself refused to work, and rather than work it drew up dirt. Smiling at he who was bewildered, his little brother touched it. When he did, it returned to working as it should and he drew up water. That was how things went. Without his little brother's help he could not interact with the world. And as long as he had his little brother as an intermediary, however indirectly, he could touch the world of beautiful harmony, and believe with great relief for the time being that it had nothing to do with him.

The world in harmony around his brother was a picture he could never enter into but using his little brother as an intermediary, he was allowed to appreciate that picture. And so all the more he was the one most at a loss when he had lost his little brother.
And yet why then? He must have had a wish for his little brother to die.
--If not, why did you have to kill him?
At the evil spirits' voice, his body hardened.
I don't know.
His little brother's death caused his neighbors to grieve. They solemnly carried the corpse discovered n the thicket, carried it into town and into the temple. During that time, those on the pathway were in tears as they saw them pass. But he cried more than any one of them. He clung to his fallen little brother as if to call him back, confirming that that wish would never be granted and leading him to wail.
Unbearable pain, bottomless despair, and yet the one who had taken his little brother from him was he himself.
---Why did you commit such a sin?
You filth, the evil spirits said as if lording over him.
You filth, the true feelings you harbored towards your little brother were jealousy.
He attained what you could not, you envied your little brother who could perform deeds you could not benefit from attempting, you longed for what he did on your behalf, you resented him for being able to. Not only did ye cradle an inferiority complex, you smelt an air of a superiority complex in his philanthropy, perceiving it as the hubris of the victor, making yourself the victim.
That's not true, he shouted.
Of course he had harbored jealousy of his little brother for being easily accepted in to the systematic ways of the world, and all the more so for living in that picture. But at the same time, on the other hand, he had also in his heart given up on himself ever being able to enter into that. That he could not enter into order and providence's favor was something intrinsic to himself, not at all his brother's fault, he himself understood that.
For example even if his brother were not there, he likely never

would have been accepted into the system. Rather, without his little brother, he would not have been able to survive. He understood that gravely.
---Then, it was revenge.
You did it as revenge against the world that would not accept you, by means of slaughtering its most beloved child.
That's not it either, he groaned.
He indeed suffered greatly the tragedy of not being accepted by the world. To tell the truth, it was not that he had never thought of using his little brother in order to take revenge. But all the same, that had never been by means of slaughtering his little brother. He had reveries of coaxing his little brother, of using his deeply loving little brother's endless sympathy, having his little brother reject the world that would not accept his older brother, fantasizing as to how much it would save him if he would come to hate it.
What was vital to that was that his little brother would refuse the world's outpouring love, not that his little brother would no longer exist. ---That was how dependent he was upon his little brother, even in this.
But at the same time he was ashamed of himself for such a reverie. That was a deeply sinful thing, he knew that such revenge would not bring forth anything. He wanted the love of the orderly world, he did not want to be isolated from the order.
It was because his little brother was within the harmony of providence that through his little brother he could play a part in the order, that he could touch upon that beautiful harmony. If his little brother, the touch point into order refused it, then together with him, the two would be cut off from the world, and he would lose the world he gained through his little brother.
---Then, why did you fatally wound him?
He did not know the answer to that.

sinnesspiel

3

Ritsuko went to the break room and heard the announcement of his death.

"Yuuki---You mean Natsuno-kun from the workshop?"

Kiyomi nodded. "Seems like he died. I'd heard it was renal failure."

I see, Ritsuko murmured. When was the last time she had seen him? When she tried to remember, all that rose to mind was his form from far away at the national highway gazing southward.

The last time she had met and spoken to him was midsummer. That day, Ritsuko had made a decision. She wouldn't leave this village. She didn't want to live the way she had seen Natsuno, at the brink of dawn idle at the highway. On that day, Ritsuko called her lover and called the carpenters. Her lover said to take some time and talk it over, but in the meantime Ritsuko herself had become busy and that had been that. It'd been some time since there had been any contact, so he must have given up on them too. As for the contractors, they had been many times now and they had said they had wanted to wait until winter to do the reconstruction but the designer had quit, and in the meantime Ritsuko herself had lost any free time she may have had, and with the misfortunes falling on the contractors the entire idea had to be put on hold for now.

Why did it end like this, Ritsuko thought again. On that day she had met Natsuno, she couldn't have imagined this situation developing. Ritsuko had realized that Natsuno had been walking south to depart, and she realized that now he was like one dying and being buried in a foreign land. Even though on that day she

had seen it as the starting point of their respective futures, stretching out in obvious and different directions, since then not a single thing had moved in that supposedly obvious direction. Even though only two months had passed since then, it felt like it was already ten years ago now. There was a cut off in there somewhere that would allow that time to be spoken of as "once long ago."

(In the end he couldn't go……)

Ritsuko ended up thinking that to herself. She was in a very sentimental mood. Though he looked so longingly towards the south, he died without being able to take off for it.

"And the doctor? He isn't back yet?" Ritsuko heard Kiyomi asking.

"On the second floor." The one who answered was Yasuyo. Yasuyo's gaze was up towards the ceiling. "In the recovery room. Constantly at his wife's side."

"His wife…… How is she?"

Kiyomi had only heard that Kyouko had collapsed, she hadn't actually seen Kyouko herself. Brought into the recovery room, Toshio was tending to every last detail for her. Yasuyo was the only one called to be present, and that was when Kyouko had first collapsed.

Yasuyo shook her head. "She's in the latter stages after all. When I'd seen her she was having respiratory failure but it also looked like there was blood in her lungs. She was jaundiced and it looked like DIC, and once it comes to that point, I don't think there's much that can be done for it really."

"Oh……"

"If she weren't his wife, she probably would have been transferred to the hospital in Mizobe. The only reason he hasn't done that is possibly because he wants to hold onto her and hold it off as long as he can himself, don't you think?"

"He's a human being too. Isn't it unexpectedly sentimental of him?

Yesterday during examination hours he went up to the second floor to check on her a number of times too. Though he really just doesn't want to be away from her side, I'd wager."

"It must be hard on him. He didn't even realize anything until she had gotten to that stage."

Ritsuko hung her head as the two talked. They didn't look like a married couple who got on that well but this was the sort of thing that couldn't be understood by outsiders. That it was hard on him, as Yasuyo said, did explain some things. The reason Toshio was so on edge was because he was blaming himself, asking why he didn't realize someone in his own family had gotten to that point, why he didn't bring her sooner, as he watched over her.

The man in question, Toshio, came back downstairs at last, long after the front desk had opened. Even once examination hours began, Toshio was often leaving his seat to go check on things on the second story. Kiyomi was the one to suggest that one of the female nurses should go to tend to her. Today there were fewer patients than usual. There was the spare time for them to care for her but Toshio shook his head. Don't fuss over her, please don't worry over her, he'd answered.

Even as noon drew closer, the number of patients didn't increase. Yesterday they said that Itou Ikumi from Mizuguchi had stormed Kanemasa. It had ended in a simple riot but because of that the villager's vague unease had dispersed hadn't it, was Kiyomi's view of the situation. It wasn't just that there were simply fewer patients either. Also unusual was that today there were no patients who had the disease in question. There wasn't a single patient presenting with anemia.

"I wonder if this is what they'd call a lull perhaps? We've passed one peak, this might just be the lull before we enter the next one. "

Yasuyo had said as much but once the lunch break had past they knew that wasn't all it was. The Ebuchi Clinic had opened for business they said. While the external construction hadn't finished yet, they had started taking patients as of yesterday.

"Somehow, it seems that they're only in business at night," Yuki said she had caught wind of such a rumor. "From five in the evening until ten o'clock, they said."

"Heh? I wonder if it's one of those night time clinics. In the city is one thing, but I wonder if such a place can do business here in the country."

"That's right, isn't it? In the city there may at least been salary men commuting or passing through, but."

Ritsuko and the others tilted their head curiously.

And then, that day, the part-timer Sekiguchi Miki neither called nor showed up for work.

Miwako couldn't forget about Ikumi's accusations. There were just too many oddities. Is it really a disease? Some thought along those lines had Miwako thinking that there was something strange beyond the abnormalities she was aware of already.

"Say…… Katsue-san?" Miwako called out to Tadagoro Katsue who was scrubbing a saucepan in the temple kitchen. "Please don't think strange of me for asking this?" With such a preface made, Miwako carefully spoke. "That is…… Before, Katsue-san, you had said that you know what is happening in the village, yes? Whatever IS happening?"

Katsue fleetingly looked to Miwako. "It isn't something a person should say out loud."

"Yesterday, somebody whose name I can't recall had come, hadn't she? One who lived in Mizuguchi."

"Itou Ikumi."

"Yes. That guest had said that it was The Risen. …… What do you think of that?"

Katsue's hand stopped, looking seriously at Miwako. Quickly she lowered her eyes and continued to polish the pot. "……Isn't Ikumi-san correct? That is what I think."

That's ridiculous, she thought while at the same time, I thought so, she felt. Miwako looked at her own hands smeared with detergent.

"Mitsuo's thinking that it's a plague it looks like but has there ever been such a plague? To begin with, if there really are no such things as Oni, why are there Oni, why are there legends of them left behind?"

"That is true, but."

"It will be all right."

Miwako held her breath as she stared at Katsue.

"After all, the temple will be all right. Since it's Oni, as long as you adhere to Buddhism and remain chaste, there is nothing to worry about. It would be one matter for an unpolished monk who couldn't even read scripture, but there is no one so impure here."

"That's---true, isn't it?"

Miwako smiled faintly. Yes, Oni were a ridiculous concept. But because there were folk tales and legends, it wouldn't be strange for them to in fact be real. On the contrary, they were such a ridiculous idea that nobody would tell the tales again if they weren't. If this were a case of Oni, the temple would be safe. Her husband and her son would be passed over by them. If it were a plague, the temple would not be spared, but if it were Oni.....

(That's right, it's Oni. It must be.)

Miwako persueded herself as she washed.

Ikebe stood in the kitchen doorway, looking at the floor in confusion. Ikebe couldn't see Miwako nor Katsue from where he was standing but as hushed as their conversation was, in the wide kitchen it echoed enough to be well heard.

(That's ridiculous....)

Oni or The Risen or whatever. Things like that didn't exist in this

world.

(But, all these deaths are...)

There were many dead this year. It was no ordinary number. They said it was an epidemic but if it were an epidemic, it'd be on the news, the Administration would step in, there would be something of that nature going on he would think. There wasn't a single concrete story anywhere affirming it as an epidemic. The only thing spreading was the rumor that a disease was.

(But, even so, Oni?)

That couldn't be it. Monsters like that were put away with the toy chests. He believed in them as a child, enough to be scared out of his wits, but he wasn't of an age to fear something that ridiculous any longer.

(It can't be.)

Ikebe quietly turned back. He went down the hallway to the temple office. The hallway back was long, and darkness coiled about its length. The floorboards creaked. It was like someone was following behind his footsteps. But turning around to confirm there was nobody behind him would be a child's action.

Forcing himself with great effort not to be aware of what was behind him, Ikebe returned to the temple office. There, Mitsuo was peering at Tsurumi's face.

"I'm serious, are you all right? Your expression doesn't look very good?"

Tsurumi was limp in the chair he sat in. It might have been general weariness, the season being what it was he might have caught a cold or something. He'd seemed spaced out since that morning, somehow.

Ikebe looked into Tsurumi's eyes that seemed to be drifting as if with fever when a sudden fearful chill struck him.

---He didn't think this was a sickness. Even so, Oni, that was just

too stupid.

"Wouldn't it be better to go home already and get some rest?"

"That's right," Ikebe interposed. "There are no more services or appointments today, please head home and rest."

"……No," Tsurumi said, his voice breathless.

"Don't say that," Ikebe said, forcefully. "It's definitely a cold. It's plain on your face. Go home, warm up and sleep, please."

"Hey, have you heard?"

The one shouting that out in an excited voice while rushing to the Takemura store front was Ohtsuka Yaeko. The ones at the folding chairs were the usuals, Ooitarou and Takeko and this time Ohkawa Namie.

"You're late. It's about Ikumi-san, isn't it?" The one to say that was the one who had first brought the news, Namie.

"Oh my, you'd heard?"

"Heard nothing! She was standing at the corner of our shop shouting out and carrying on for so long!"

"Well dear me."

"Now her, she's a certified lunatic. I always thoguht she was dangerous to begin with, myself."

"She really is," Yaeko nodded. "Oni of all things, too. It's one thing to say that and mean it, but to even take it to the Kanemasa's doorstep, storming on them, really now!"

Takeko laughed. "What's this coming from you? You believed it a little! I know, you know. You bought an ofuda charm from Ikumi-san didn't you?"

Dear, Yaeko said drawing back. "I didn't really believe it. I was humoring her, humoring. --How could anyone believe that, Oni of

all things. It's too stupid to come to anything."

"Is it?"

"It is! I mean, what she'd said about this year being no good, that the dead this year have been making for a terrible feeling is true, but. Even so, there's no such things as Oni now are there?"

Takeko gave an exaggerated nod.

"Really. In the first place, there's this fuss about how many have died but don't things like this happen? Summer was harsh this year, and it was a long and hot summer heat too. It's a village of old people to begin with."

"That's right."

Ooitarou laughed. "With that, she threw a big fuss, calling it Oni and all. Even stormed on Kanemasa, the master of the house told her off right good, now she's the butt of a joke all over town."

Really, the elderly gathered around laughed aloud. Tatsu listened to that laughter with a scowl.

---Things like this happen? What bull!

Something strange was happening in the village. These deaths weren't normal. They tended to come in waves, but it was clearly beyond that now. Even if they were elderly, it shouldn't have passed a hundred.

(.....This is going to be bad.)

Tatsu thought to herself. Earlier they were gathering here with their uncertainties, harboring doubts about the situation and today they were saying "There aren't any Oni" and lept from that to "this isn't anything unusual" in one bound. When faced with an abnormal situation, presented with an answer that defied common sense, it looked like they were now just denying that the situation appeared abnormal at all anymore.

But this situation was definitely abnormal. Whether it was Oni or

not, there was no mistaking that something abnormal was happening in the village.

(If everyone in the village is acting like this.....)

Tatsu faintly drew her shoulders inward. She felt like shehad caught a fleeting glimpse of something that there was no being saved from.

Toshio finished the day's examinations while having left his seat several times. The reception desk closed at six o'clock. While Ritsuko was cleaning up after closing, Sekiguchi Miki had called. Just as everyone had been vaguely suspecting, Miki said she was quitting. One by one they were becoming a more lonely lot. Ritsuko though chilling thoughts as she changed out of her uniform.

".....Nagata-san?" As she left the hospital, she called out to Kiyomi seeing her walking a different path than usual. Kiyomi turned about and smiled.

"I'm just going to see how Miki-san is doing."

"But....."

"She really is free to quit and all, but she's already getting on in years isn't she? I'm worried about how she's going to make a living from now on, things like that."

That's true, Ritsuko said, giving a wave to Kiyomi. Kiyomi also waved to Ritsuko, then hurried down the road as the sun was already mostly set. The darkness was falling and cold settling in. It was almost as if the midsummer heatwave were a lie.

Fall had suddenly set in. While being pressured by patients, while rushing about with the business at work, Kiyomi realized just how much time had passed. She pulled up the collar on her coat. She would need to adjust her wardrobe. With no time to breathe, just taking out what she needed as she needed, October had already half passed.

Different from her usual path, Kiyomi took the turn towards Naka-Sotoba. On the way she passed before the hill that lead up to

Kanemasa and for only a short instant, she looked up the hill.

(The Risen, huh.....)

She shrugged with a wry smile. With that she continued towards the community of Naka-Sotoba, following the line of houses by vague memory looking for Sekiguchi Miki's house. Miki lived alone. Her heavy drinker of a husband suffered liver failure about ten years ago, and ever since she'd been loitering around the house. Miki managed the bills with part time work but then two years ago her husband had died of cirrhosis of the liver. Kiyomi and the other nurses helped with the funeral. She had children but they hated their layabout of a father, and all of them had left the village. All of the children, who did attend the funeral, seemed sympathetic enough towards their mother but at the same time they seemed to be abandoning their mother who never could take a resolute stance against their father.

She understood the feeling but still, Kiyomi said to herself in her mind. She knew what it was like to fear the hospital. But still, what was Miki going to do from now on? If she remembered, it was a financially tight household. There was nothing of value in the home to put any value in, and their savings had been drank away by her husband until he'd died. They'd sold off the mountain and paddy field land they'd owned long ago, and the man of the house now deceased had been shuffled from post to post so much between jobs that there wasn't enough of a pension to live off of.

Going by memory, she followed the alleyway to a small house deep within. She put a hand to the glass entryway door but it was locked. Kiyomi lightly knocked on the door and called out.

"Miki-san, it's Nagata."

A person appeared in the entryway. Through the glass door she could see a human shape in the faint light. The person who opened the door was a middle aged woman she didn't recognize.

"Who might you be?"

"Uhm..... This is Sekiguchi Miki-san's house, isn't it?"

"It is, but?"

"I'm Nagata from the hospital, but. Is Miki-san---"

"Right now she's in the bath."

"Uhm, I'm sorry, but who are you?"

"I'm her niece."

Kiyomi tilted her head. Any relatives she had Kiyomi should have met at the funeral but she didn't remember ever seeing this woman. Just past the entryway in the living room she heard a TV. She could see what looked like a single middle aged man from behind.

"So, what do you need?"

The woman's tone was certainly not warm. It definitely seemed Kiyomi was an uninvited guest.

"Well..... Miki-san said she's quitting her part time job, so I came to see what might be the matter, and....."

Ah, the woman said casually. "Quit your job, I told her. My aunt is getting on in years too, so I've moved in with her. I told her we'd look after her, so she doesn't need to force herself to work anymore."

"My..... Is that right?"

Despite being so apparently close with Miki, she hadn't seen her at the funeral had she, Kiyomi had a mind to say but of course she didn't actually say it aloud. For a time, Kiyomi peeked into the house but the woman asked "Is that all?" in her stiff, formal tone, and so she had to give up on meeting with her.

"Thank you.... I'm sorry for interrupting. Give my regards to Miki-san, please."

The woman gave a courtesy nod and then slammed the door shut. There was the sound of the lock being turned within.

Somehow, Kiyomi found it hard to leave the place she was standing. There was an unease she couldn't place.

Maybe it was because she didn't seem like she had strong enough sentiments towards Miki to believe she would look after the old woman. She had the feeling she hadn't seen her face at the funeral though that didn't seem to be all; the woman's attitude towards Kiyomi was lacking in the warmth one might expect from a coworker of one's beloved aunt. The man kept his back turned the full time without looking back. Normally wouldn't one at least want to peek at a visitor, she thought. ---And, there was something else, an unease with a more placeable form.

Tilting her head in bewilderment as she went back along the alleyway, she came before the row of houses as she realized the source of her unease. There was the smell of soy sauce and baking fish wafting from a nearby house. ---That's right, despite it being about dinner time, there was no smell at all of dinner from Miki's house.

Kiyomi turned to look behind her. Looking for just a moment at Miki's house, she took in a breath and shook her head. And what would you say about that, she convinced herself as she hurried along to her own home.

From within Miki's house, the woman saw Kiyomi leave. Peering through an opening in the glass door, she confirmed that Kiyomi had taken her leave. Returning to the living room, the lone man wordlessly watched the TV. The family altar further in the living room had a futon laid out before it. There was an older woman laid out, breathing in wheezes. The family altar beside the futon was empty. No centerpiece nor Buddhist tool remained. The emptiness gaped down upon Miki.

sinnesspiel

4

"Akira, say, the other day didn't you get a call from the Workshop's son?"

It was dinner time when Akira's mother Sachiko asked him that.

"Mm, yeah, I did?"

"I thought so," Sachiko said as she set out the bowls of miso soup and took off her apron. "That son of the workshop? It seems he died."

Chopsticks frozen in hand, Akira stared at his mother's face. "……Died?"

"I just heard about it in passing, but. When I went out to do some shopping, I heard them talking about it. At any rate, it seems like they said he died this morning. That's when I thought, didn't you know him?"

Akira was frozen with terror, and Kaori's eyes went wide.

"But that's…… He said if anything happened, he'd let us know!"

"I'm sure he had enough to think about and forgot. The poor thing. Wasn't he still in high school?"

Akira threw down the chopsticks and stood. "What the hell?!"

"What's this about?"

"Onii-chan's dad said he'd call us didn't he?! Adults are all like that! He never planned to contact us about a thing from the start!"

Kaori lingered, watching as Akira rushed out of the living room after saying that. Her mother and father both stared jawed agape.

"Dear..... What was that about?" her mother murmured, then as if coming back to her senses, her face furrowed. "What on earth has gotten into him?"

Kaori couldn't answer. Akira's footsteps echoed down the hallway, and they could hear the entryway door roughly opening and slamming shut as he rushed outside. He was most likely storming to Natsuno's house. Or possibly just to anywhere where he could be alone. Even if she went after him, there wasn't anything she could say for him but still she wanted to be by his side, and so Kaori too set down her chopsticks. When she moved to stand up, Sachiko yelled at her.

"Leave him be!"

".....But."

"Leave him be. What's with him all of a sudden. Throwing down his chopsticks, yelling at people. If he doesn't want dinner, let him do whatever he wants. He doesn't care about who made it."

That's not it, Kaori tried to say. Akira wasn't mad at Sachiko, he was mad at Natsuno's father. But Sachiko spoke over her.

"Whatever, you just eat it down too," she said looking to Kaori's father sitting dazed at her side. "Your dad too. You're at home for once, I thought, so I tried to make things you like, so could you not waste it?"

Yeah, her father murmured but even so he just looked to the plate half-heartedly without taking a hand do it. Kaori once again worried about Akira---and Natsuno too, and didn't really feel like taking a hand to her meal.

"I see. Then just do what you want. You, Akira, your dad" Sachiko said as if spitting out the words. "Just what do you think I am, anyway? I'm not your maid. Day in, day out, I have hot meals on the table for you, and without getting a single cent of payment for

it. And yet all of you! I don't even get a thank you from you! You just eat it looking like of course it's going to be there, if you don't feel like eating, you just leave it there!"

Kaori hung her head.

"And Dad says he's working and doesn't come back until the middle of the night. Working? What kind of work is there to do at the town hall! You're really just going out drinking with everyone from work aren't you? I thought you were working overtime, so I prepared a hot meal for you, but you say you don't want it and go right to bed, then you two, you two, let me tell you, you don't care when dinner is, you just run out to play!"

Her father's head was hung, blinking as if bewildered.

"I try to keep something warm to put out waiting for you, but no matter how long I wait you don't come back. I ask you to watch the house but you leave, running out to play without helping out at all. You just go to play whatever you want, coming back when you want, you just figure that dinner will obviously be there when you come, don't you?"

"……I'm sorry."

"Spare me your apologies. Just do whatever you want!" she lashed out and then took to her food silently scooping it up. Kaori did a subdued mimicry of her actions. When Sachiko finished eating on her own, she gathered up her own dishes. She washed the dishes in a burst of noise, as if it were an angry outburst.

"Dad…… I'm sorry?" Kaori said in a quiet voice. "We got mom mad. So she got mad at Dad, too."

"……It's fine." her father said in a low voice. Kaori thought his voice seemed oddly lacking in power. He kept his hands near the food, but as was said he didn't actually start eating it.

"What's wrong? You're not eating? If you leave it, Mom will get mad again."

That's right, her father said, but indeed he showed no sign of

taking up his chopsticks.

"Dad, are you sick? No appetite?"

"……Yeah." Tanaka murmured and set down his chopsticks. He aimlessly stood.

"……Dad?"

"I'm going to the hospital."

"Are you all right?"

Yeah, Tanaka nodded, taking his coat from where it hung. He took out a card from a satchel of paperwork kept by the TV.

Kaori tilted her head. It was a patient's registration ticket. She saw "Ebuchi Clinic" writen on it.

"Dad, you've been sick? For a while now?"

Had he been going to the hospital? He must have been keeping it hushed. Kaori looked up at her father but he smiled at her.

"I'm all right. Anyway, I'm going out for a bit."

Kaori nodded. As her father left she was alone in the living room. It was an unpleasant atmosphere, with the noise Sachiko was kicking up. Normally, this would be when Kaori and her father would try to butter up to her mother. They'd praise the meal, put on a show of eating it as if it were that delicious, express gratitude to her for making it, and to help her a bit as proof of it. But it was true that Kaori and her father had no appetite. It was by no means her mother's fault but with them unable to butter up to her as usual, her mother was only all the more irritated.

Her father had left the scene. Kaori wanted to escape too, but if at least she didn't eat, she had a feeling things would get worse. She forced herself to eat, even without tasting it. All while worrying about Akira and her father.

sinnesspiel

5

Late at night, Toshio opened his eyes. He was in the nap space of the nurse's station.

Thinking he heard a faint noise, Toshio held his breath. Just in case, he did furnish a guardian deity and an incense burner at the bedside. Based on Kirishiki's reaction he didn't think things like juzu and incense powder would be very effective but he wasn't so bold as to sleep without any kind of protections set up at all.

Lying atop the bed, he quieted his breath and observed his surroundings. There was a curtain drawn around the bed area so he couldn't see beyond them. He had to rely on the sounds about him.

Toshio listened closely. He thought he heard something faint, like footsteps, but he wasn't sure. If somebody was up walking around, it was impossible for it to be Kyouko. No matter how you looked at it, she wasn't in a state to be able to walk. If somebody were here, that would have to be somebody who snuck in through the back entrance. Toshio had left the back door unlocked. He also didn't lock the recovery room.

It sounded like the noise was continuing but it also seemed like it might have been an auditory hallucination. Because of the single lamp lit in the nurse's station, the curtain around the bed cast a yolk-yellow wave of shadows. There was no shadow cast on it. Toshio had to bare the burning temptation to open the curtain and peek out.

Listening even more closely, this time he could very clearly hear a faint noise. It was the sound of a door opening. At the same time the curtain wavered as if there were a faint opening. Someone was

here, that was certain. Toshio kept down his excited breath. Even if he listened closely he couldn't hear a sound beyond that but eventually he did hear the sound of the back entrance opening and closing in the hallway.

Toshio let out his breath. Somebody had come and gone. That was certain. He eventually opened the curtain and sat in the silence of the shadow cast over the nursing station. Getting out of the bed, he went towards the recovery room. Peeking through the door window, Kyouko was laid out atop the bed, dozing just as before.

He quietly opened the door. Soon he noticed the monitor's signals changing. Her pulse was weak. And the intervals were growing further apart. As he stared over her, before long even the slightest reactions of the monitor ceased. As if remembering something, one more weak wave was drawn, and from then on it stopped completely.

Toshio stared down indifferently. Cardiac arrest. 2:02AM. He hesitated a bit but ultimately didn't provide any resussitation attempts.

---It's a gamble from here on.

Kyouko might have risen and she might not have. Since he would be the one to fill out the death certificate, adjusting the written time of death would be a simple matter but he had to do something to put off the signs of death for a time. If he didn't, at the funeral the corpse in the coffin would already be rotting.

Turning towards the ice maker at the nurse's station, he took all of the ice that was were. He divided it out and sealed it, wrapped them in towels and lined them up around Kyouko's body completely. After changing the placement of the ice packs a few times, he pulled the cover up. He turned the monitor's angle so that it couldn't be seen from the outside.

Rise up for me, Toshio said as he looked down at the corpse of the woman who was his wife.

".....I'm putting it all on you on whether I can go against them or

not."

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6

The one to notice the noises first was Tamae. There was an incessant knocking on the back kitchen door. Tamae sat up in the living room. For a time she stayed within the futon, tilting her head at the strange nearby noise. When she looked at the clock she saw that it was about 2:30. She couldn't think of why a person would come to visit at this hour, or even who would.

Finally her confusion reached its ends and Tamae went to the other room, calling to Ikumi.

"Mom?"

"Aa." It seemed Ikumi was awake. She sat up and peered towards the kitchen. "Don't talk with them. It's bound to be an Oni anyway. They came to get revenge on me."

That can't be, Tamae murmured, but she couldn't think of their visitor as anything normal either. If she opened the door something bad would happen, she couldn't fight that feeling.

For a time the two quieted their breath, but the knocking noise didn't stop. Ikumi staggeringly rose.

"……Mom."

"It's all right. I'm just going to have a look."

Without turning on the light, Ikumi went into the kitchen. The door in the kitchen was an old hinged door, so it didn't even have a lock. But since the latch didn't work, there was a string tied around the door knob and to a nail on the wall to keep it shut. Somebody was knocking on the door. When they put a little bit of power into

it, the door wavered. Tamae and Ikumi watched it do so when at last Ikumi called out in a low voice.

"Who's there? At this hour."

The knocking sound on the door stopped.

"Come back tomorrow why don't you? Do you know what time it is? I don't take night-time customers."

That somebody outside the door began to bang on the door once again more furiously.

"Who is it? Why don't you give your name properly."

"……It's Yamazaki," a woman's voice said. "Yamazaki Waka from Kami-Sotoba. Please, let me in."

"I refuse. I can't open the door for you. Try coming again during the daytime."

"Please. I fled here. Save me!"

Tamae looked to her mother. Ikumi's brows furrowed as if thinking deeply on something.

"……Yamazaki from Shimo-Sotoba, you said? Didn't you all move out just recently?"

No, Waka shouted out. "We were forced along against our will. My husband and children were captured. I'm the only one who managed to get away. Please, help me!"

Ikumi turned to face Tamae.

"Bring me the incense powder."

"But……"

Do it, Ikumi said while taking up a rusted kitchen knife. She looked for the salt container. Tamae went to her mother's room and returned bringing a box of incense powder from the altar.

"Open the door for her. .....Careful now."

Tamae nodded and held her breath as she let the string off the door. The glass door had been opened from the outside. She caught a peek at a small framed middle aged woman's face. Her hair was disheveled, and her clothing had a faint sour smell. Ikumi threw the incense towards that sight. The woman turned her body away in surprise, but unlike the man who had come the evening before, she didn't seem to suffer for it. Even when Ikumi chanted a litany at her, she only listened with a strange expression.

"At any rate it doesn't look like you're an Oni at least."

Ikumi murmured. Waka nodded.

"All right, get in." Ikumi said, as Waka slid inside and then collapsed there as if with relief. at Ikumi's urging Tama turned on the kitchen light. Under the light, Waka's condition was all the more pitiful. Tamae didn't know the full circumstances but that she was taken away and escaped would explain it.

"And? What happened with what?"

Waka looked up from where she sat. Her color was poor, and her voice seemeth lethargic and despondent. "Please help me. My husband and children are still captured. .....They'll be killed."

"If you don't tell the story from the start, it won't make sense."

Waka nodded. "How many days ago was it now... I don't even know what day it is now."

"The fifteenth. It's the sixteenth by this hour, though."

"Then..... Five days ago, was it? It was on the tenth. .....On the night of the tenth, my daughter brought by the wife of the Kirishiki's."

"----Kanemasa's?"

Waka gave an energyless nod. She looked to be past the brink of exhaustion. Tamae thought it would be best for her to rest first but

Ikumi continued to block her way.

"We served her tea, and the next day my husband had been acting strange. He seemed unusually tired. The day after that he still seemed so, just when I thought he should be seen by a doctor, in the night," Waka shivered. "......In the night, men I didn't know came to the house. They died us up and took out our things. My husband was just watching....."

"A freight company?"

"Yes," Waka nodded. "I heard my husband talking with somebody outside about moving. Me and my children were gagged, we couldn't get out a sound... And then, we were put on a loading rack with the luggage."

Tamae took in a gasp. Then, Waka and her family really were kidnapped.

"We were brought to an old house and closed in. It was a terrible place, there wasn't food or enough water....."

"And your husband?" Ikumi leaned over Waka.

"He was with us. Even when I tried to ask him what was happening, I couldn't understand. He was sick. It was like he was spaced out. He had a high fever....." Waka stopped midway in her words. She let out a faint sobbing noise. "For a while, my husband was taken out. After some time had passed, my child was too. It might have been the next day.....I don't know. It was pitch black in there all the time."

"And you didn't see them since?"

Waka nodded and covered her face.

"And then?"

"I was left there alone with my daughter for quite a long time. And then someone came..... The young man from Kanemasa. That's who I think it probably was. He took me out of there. I was drug down a dark hallway, changed to another cage like place. I was tied

to a post. It was worse than before, a room that really had nothing."

"And you were the only one there?"

"......That's right. I was left there for a long while. That's when a person came in. It was....." Waka covered her face and shook her head.

"Who came in?"

"I don't think that you'll believe me. But I was sure of it. I knew who it was. He was my daughter's classmate after all."

"Who came in?"

"It was Yuu-kun. From Sotoba. The son of Shimizu Gardening. It's true, I wasn't mistaking someone for him."

Tamae gasped, looking between her mother and Taka. It wasn't as if Tamae knew Shimizu Gardens. But she'd heard the gossip in the neighborhood about her mother having stormed in and made a scene at the funeral.

It can't be, Tamae murmured but Ikumi nodded as if she understood.

"The dead son. Ryuuji-san's grandson."

Waka nodded.

"I'm sure you don't believe me, but it really was Yuu-kun. I was so surprised. And that's when--that's when,"

"What's when?"

Waka lifted her tear streaked face. She opened the collar of her crumpled bouse. She loosened the top area. At the dirt smeared base of Waka's neck were two small scar marks.

"This is....."

"I was bitten. It sounds like a joke, but it's true. Yuu-kun bit me

here."

Tamae let out a small sound and stepped back. "Then that's....."

The word absurd came to mind. It really was absurd but she was afraid for she could only think it was true.

"Yes," Ikumi Ikumi said, her voice low. "I see, the Oni. It was them."

"For a while after, I was in a daze. My body felt sluggish, like it didn't want to let me do anything. But I was worried about my daughter, about my son. My head cleared little by little, and then I desperately fled out of there. I thought if I stayed there I'd be killed....."

"Yes. You did well to run away, didn't you?"

Waka nodded.

"I think that I was lucky. When they came to see how I was, I pretended I was too tired and was sleeping. Then, they thought that I was dead it seems. They left without locking....."

I see, Ikumi said tapping Waka's arm. "That's really some good luck you had."

"But my husband and children are still back there. I hurried to return to the village but, this, if I tell anybody about this, nobody would believe it...."

"That's right."

"Ikumi-san was the only one I could think of. During Yuu-kun's funeral, you were saying it was Oni weren't you? So I thought if it were Ikumi-san, she might believe me, and I...."

Ikumi nodded. "You're a sharp one. That's it exactly."

"Please, save my husband and children!" Waka grasped Ikumi's arm. Ikumi grimaced.

"I want to do that so very much but. Where is it you were taken to?"

I don't know, Waka said hanging and shaking her head.

"If you don't even know that....." Ikumi sighed. "And what's more, I'm alone. The bunch in the village definitely won't believe a word we say to them."

"I've brought proof."

"Proof?" Ikumi braced herself. Waka gave a slow-moving nod. "When I ran away, I brought them with me. The kanjo. Notes with their posthumous names---"

Tamae blinked. The kanjo were put into the coffins and buried in the village. There was no normal means by which somebody could get inside of a buried coffin. Having those meant that the grave were they were buried had been dug up.

"There were many of them. So, I brought as many as I could and ran away. Along the way I hid them in a shrine as I went, but."

"I see. It was probably clever to hide them in a shrine. They probably can't touch them there after all."

"With those, I wonder if the people in the village might accept it too. Ikumi-san, I'm begging you, please help me."

Ikumi nodded. "All right then. As soon as the dawn comes---"

Waka shook her head. "Even now, my husband and children could be being killed. That's why I came to you even at this hour. Please, hurry."

But, Ikumu murmured.

"If it's Ikumi-san, then there's nothing to fear from them is there? You can easily cast them out. And what's more, we're going to a shrine. It'll be safe, won't it?"

Tamae looked between her mother and Waka. She found herself

feeling uncomfortable. She was sympathetic towards Waka but there was something strange about Waka's story. But after being in thought for a bit Ikumi nodded.

"I understand. Lead the way."

"Mom!"

Tamae tried to stop her but Ikumi turned to look at her, hard hearted.

"You're so noisy! Be quiet. You wouldn't understand it, but this is important what's happening here."

"That's not what I..."

Tamae tried to speak but Ikumi wouldn't allow it. He returned to her room, took out her coat and put it on. She urged Waka.

"Let's go. Since I'm with you it will be all right now."

"Thank you so much." Waka said all but worshipfully, heading outside the kitchen door. She urged Ikumi to come along, and she followed.

"Mom, wait,"

"You just stay safe at home. You can't do anything, after all."

"But."

"No matter who may come, don't let them in. You understand?" Ikumi said, closing the kitchen door. Tamae was left alone in the kitchen. An ominous premonition rose in her chest. Something in Waka's story seemed strange. She couldn't help thinking that Ikumi's rushing out was a mistake.

(That shouldn't be.....)

Her mother was more formidable than herself. Tamae was a dullard, compared to her mother, she really couldn't use her head

well. She'd always been told that, and she thought so herself. What her mother was doing shouldn't have been a mistake. ---But.

Waka said that she didn't know where she was taken to. That might have been true. But if she didn't know where that was, then how did she know how to get back to the village? She said the only one who would believer her would be Ikumi. That might have indeed been true. But she had that decisive proof, she said. She said that with that they could convince the villagers. If they had the kanjo, they could do it, was the reasoning but if that was what she thought, why didn't she bring those kanjo to a relative or a friend when hurrying?

"Mom....."

Unable to bare it, Tamae rushed out of the kitchen door but the darkness had fallen outside. Fear cramped her legs and she couldn't chase after her mother. The nights had changed these days. Something was strange in this village.

Unable to stand it, Tamae loitered about the house. Several times she tried to peek outside, and on a whim she prayed at the alrar. One hour passed, two hours. When her mother returned, it was just before dawn.

"----Mom!"

When Tamae came to greet her, her mother's face was thinned and ghastly pale. She looked dismayed, and Waka was nowhere to be seen.

"Mom, where is Waka-san?"

Ikumi didn't answer Tamae's question. Without saying a word she returned to her room, then loitered around digging in that area.

"Mom?"

Ikumi turned to face Tamae. Her face was as colorless as paper.

"Listen, don't say a word about meeting anyone tonight."

Tamae nodded. "I won't. But,"

"I'm going into hiding for a while."

Turning her face away from Tamae who gave a surprised sound, Ikumi began packing. She crammed some clothing and accessories into a paper bag.

"I've gotten my hands on something incredible. If they knew about it, they definitely wouldn't let me off easy. The same goes for you. If you run your mouth carelessly, they might come for you too. You've got to be sure to keep it quiet."

"……I will. But."

"Until the heat dies down, I'm going into hiding. Don't worry, I'll contact you soon, and I'll be coming back."

"Mom."

Ikumi changed her clothes and went to the entryway with her paper bag.

"You hear me? Be absolutely quiet about tonight. If someone asks, tell them I've gone to a relative's house for a while. If you say more than you have to, it'll be your life lost after all."

Tamae gave an uncertain nod. Ikumi closed the entryway door. It was before dawn, it was still dark out, only the sky holding blue hints of dawn.

Ikumi once more threatened her to keep her mouth shut, and then she left the house. Her gait seemed strange and off. Tamae was left behind, dumbfounded in the house. Unable to move she watched as her mother went around the corner, then distantly hear the sound of a car door closing, the sound of an engine running.

Tamae gripped at her chest. There was a strange pain there. When the sound of the car faded, the silence loomed heavily. She couldn't help feeling that she had been separated from her mother forever.

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Culture Notes

9 - 6
Kanjo

- charms or slips of paper written upon by a Buddhist monk and traditionally placed on the inside of the coffin lid. Sometimes in modern days they're rested on the body during the last viewing, as monks are not always the ones to prepare and place the body into the coffin any longer. Different sects have variations on how it's done, but the general elements on kanjo are the six kanji characters making up a familiar chant of "I believe in the Buddha" and the date of death, the age of when the person died, the dead's posthumous name, and often the mark of the monk who issued the kanjo. One reason for this charm is because it isn't considered good in Buddhism to worship a corpse, and yet when praying and focusing on the corpse during various funeral events it certainly seems worship is directed at it; the slip of paper marks not the corpse but the person who is going on to another realm of enlightenment, or alternately to make it clear that it's a prayer to a deity or Buddha instead.

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1

Mutou Tamotsu peered down into the coffin and went stiff. The flowers he'd prepared for their parting wouldn't leave his hands.

The tatami room was not very wide itself, and within that room was a coffin.The face of the one stretched out in that coffin was peaceful with no particular signs of disturbance, but there was most certainly a sense of separation conveyed on that face.

He hadn't seen him lately. Even though before he had been coming over all the time. Tamotsu was so caught up in his own grief that he couldn't have imagined Natsuno who had been out of sight and out of mind had fallen ill.

(I should have at least called.)

Why didn't he, he asked himself. If he had done that much then at least he could have paid a sick visit.

Since last night's vigil, Tamotsu couldn't stop repeating those regrets in his mind. He lost his brother, Masao had passed away, Tamotsu should have realized it then. There was nobody who would be eternally at his side. Just saying "see ya" didn't mean that you'd definitely meet someone again. Meeting them as you did today might be the last time, that was a truth he should have realized sooner.

And this really was an eternal separation. Just like with his brother Tohru--and just like with Masao, from here on, the being called Yuuki natsuno would no longer be a part of Tamotsu's life.

"……Tamotsu."

His sister Aoi urged him with a tearful voice, and Tamotsu released the white flowers. Bearing that pain he took two, three steps. Turning back he fled to the corner of the tatami room. There weren't many in attendance. It might have been since he hadn't moved here that long ago. Strangely, there were no signs of any people who looked to be his classmates either. Because of that the emptiness of the tatami room was distinct. There with him was Aoi who had followed after him and patted his shoulder.

"You can still see him at the temple. Natsu's being buried in the village."

First looking to Aoi as she spoke comfortingly, Tamotsu then looking to the gathering of his father and Hirosawa and the others.

"He's.... it's true he's being buried at the temple?"

"That's right," Hirosawa said sympathetically. "Yuuki-san said that since he'd finally become a member of the village, he wanted to have him buried here too."

I see, Tamotsu said with a pain clutching in his chest. "......He never was, even at the very end of the end, able to get out of the village."

Tamotsu, Aoi said reproachfully. Tamotsu knew it sounded like he was condemning Yuuki who'd made the decision about his burial. ---But.

"He should have been cremated. If they did that, at least he could become smoke and get away. Nee-san, you know too don't you? How much Natsuno really wanted to get out of the village."

He had quietly been making arrangements to do so. And yet in the end he couldn't get out.

Hirosawa and the others exchanged looks. With a look to Yuuki, who was sitting beside Azusa who seemed in a daze, who looked up as if surprised, Tamotsu fled the room. If he stayed behind there, he thought he might end up saying something like please don't be so cruel as to bury him here.

"Tamotsu....."

Aoi stood from the seat beside him to chase after him.

"I know how you feel but you can't do things like that. To Natsu's dad, he decided it thinking it was the best thing."

"Mm..... I know."

"And Natsu said it himself, he doesn't care and won't know what happens after he's dead."

Tamotsu gave a smile, and covered his face that seemed as if he might cry on his sleeve. "......Yeah."

Desperately fighting back the tears, somehow he swallowed down his sob and looked up, only to see Aoi crouching covering her face.

"......I've had enough of this. How long is this going to go on?!"

Tamotsu nodded. Really how much more of this would there be? They lost their brother, their childhood friend, Natsuno had died---and, who would be next? He didn't think this would be the last. Surely soon new of someone else's death would come and Tamotsu would lose another major figure in his life. It might have been one of his parents or it might have been Aoi. Maybe it'd be Tamotsu himself.

"The Tamo's Hiro-chan too, it seems like he's sick now they say....."

Aoi lifted her face at his murmuring to himself. "Is he?"

"Yeah. He hasn't been coming to school for a while now."

Aoi let out something between a sigh and a sob. "......What's going on?"

Yeah, Tamotsu nodded. Since that summer there had been a lot of dead people he'd been told, and it was true. He didn't think that it would continue into this many people. Talking at school, all of his classmates said "it's cursed there, ain't it?" In truth, that might have

been the case he thought. Not just as a joke, but some god of pestilence may have been cursing them, here in this village. It was quietly corroding the village, thinning out the people. --The Oni were dragging people off into the mountains.

Tamotsu suddenly furrowed his brows.Dragged off by an Oni, that was what this was like, he thought, a thought that pulled at him itself.

"Natsuno..... The last time I saw him, he did something weird."

"Something weird?"

"Yeah. Remember, on the day Masao's vigil was. It came that night right? At that time he'd brought a bunch of videos he rented. And they were all horror flicks."

".....Natsu did? Was Natsu into that kind of thing?"

"I don't think he was. Until then, he'd never brought up anything like that. And at the time he didn't seem like was watching them seriously or getting into them. He was fast-forwarding through them one after another. Like he was looking for something....."

Yes, when it came to the vital or the scariest scenes, he fast-forwarded. The only scenes Natsuno was watching seriously were the scenes that didn't seem very interesting, just the conversations. For example the scenes where the man hunting the vampires talked a lot.

Suddenly Tamotsu's eyes opened.He couldn't remember what videos Natsuno had rented and brought that day. But there was one other trend that the miscellaneous assortment had besides being horror.

"He....." Natsuno was suspicious, he thought. That this might be the work of Oni. And then he died. If the successive deaths were the work of Oni, he was carried off by an Oni. ---Those who suspect that Oni exist are taken away by them.

".....What is it?"

Aoi tilted her head. Tamotsu repressed the chill running down his spine and shook his head.

"No, it's nothing. I'm just thinking too much..... About a lot of things."

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2

Tamo Sadaichi left the Shrine office with a deep sigh. Talk of the caretakers that had started that evening took longer than the discussions of the Month of the Frost Kagura, complicated by the continuous deaths. Wasn't it an epidemic, a new strain or something not yet discovered, some people had said, others spitting out equally uneasy prospects. While everyone said that that was surely what it was, none the less, everybody seemed, strangely, not to believe it.

At any rate, it took until 11 PM, when at last they came to the conclusion that it was precisely because of the great solemnity in the village that they should hold the festival.

The Kagura that took place in the village was called the Month of the Frost Kagura, an Ise-style Kagura, but in practice it was more of an Izumo-style Kagura with the Ise-style's hot water added. There were three torimono performances, dances with the sacred cedar bow and staff, along with nine god play Noh performances, then at the end the purifying mineral deposits from the hot water would be sprinkled over the audience; but while this was in the olden days known as The Twelve Divine Arts to the Five Gods, since the addition of Noh's sacred Three Ritual prelude counted as a single act, it became The Thirteen Acts to the Five Gods. The village didn't call in any established Noh masters. Those of the village passed the rituals down amongst themselves. Some of the musical numbers had already died out for there was nobody left to teach them, and for some those who did know and would pass it on had suddenly moved such as Yasumori Seichirou, but even if they had to rely on rote memorization, they should try to do all thirteen again, so the talks went.

(Now then..... That will be quite the undertaking.)

Sadaichi himself didn't remember all of The Thirteen Acts to the Five Gods. Many of them, amongst them Sadaichi himself, had only seen them a few times as a child. It would be something they would have to ask the elderly to see if any of them remembered.

(Come to think of it, Baa-san said she knew Miwa and The Three Rituals, didn't she?)

He remembered his wife talking about that. Women couldn't take part in the sacred rituals. In some cases, shrine maidens could have the honor of preserving the memory of the dances but there were none who took part in Sotoba's Month of the Frost Kagura. The only time women took part in the sacred dances were during the great rice plantings. There was an old torimono popularly called Miwa that was a dance with a female role but even that was performed by a man with a female mask. According to his wife, there seemed to be many girls who knew "Miwa" and "The Three Rituals" performed with the bell. It was possible that even while knowing they couldn't perform it, since the clothing was beautiful and it was a supple, willowy dance, they had wanted to do it anyway and so they learned it.

(Shall we depend on Baa-san? If the boy knows it, it'll go a lot faster, but.)

Or possibly, he thought as Sadaichi's feet came to a stop on the night road. What if either of his grandchildren knew it? But his younger grandson---Hiroya, was now laid up in bed. Guessing by the look on Toshio's face, it wasn't good. In truth, day by day it seemed to be getting worse, and Toshio said it'd be better to have him sent to the National Hospital. Have him hospitalized, he had said, but Hiroya himself had firmly refused.

(It's spreading through the village, that disease.)

What its true form was, even Sadaichi didn't know. Indeed Sadaichi himself had at first thought that there was no doubt that it was an epidemic but now he had the feeling that that wasn't so much the case. At least he knew it wasn't any ordinary epidemic.

That was why the temple and Ozaki were conspirating, but none the less hadn't said anything to Sadaichi, he thought. He'd spoken of holding a meeting for the three pillars but even that was still in the air. To be honest, he didn't know anything clearly enough to have a discussion about it.

None the less even Sadaichi had a vague understanding of it. This was no normal state of affairs, and that what was happening couldn't be stopped, he knew. Since that summer many inflicted had been brought to the Mizobe hospital but not a single one had come back alive. The same went for those hospitalized at the Ozaki clinic. Yasumori Setsuko had been hospitalized too he'd heard but she had died. Not a single one had come back. That's why he hadn't decided to send his grandson away to the hospital. If he left the house that would be their final separation, so the pattern went, and that thought united all within the family.

Sadaichi let out a sigh. His grandson was only seventeen. He was in eleventh grade. A large boy enrolled in the track and field club, he was a child of sound mind and body. None the less, he collapsed. And it was possible that quite soon the Tamo family too might have to hold a funeral. Sadaichi was aware of himself preparing for that possibility.

Once more letting out a deep sigh, Sadaichi walked on. Just as the village road entered into his neighborhood, he had come to the morder of Kami-Sotoba and Monzen. The house just before him had its lights on. Even though it was night time, the storm doors weren't pulled shut and the light was spilling out into the yard, and lately here that was a rarity. He realized that it had been some time since he'd seen a house open to the outside like this. Even though it was nearing the dead of night there was a single child playing in the yard. Seeing that child, Sadaichi's breath stopped.

"You..... You're Shizuka-chan aren't you?"

The child throwing up the leaves at the side of the house looked up. Now that he thought about it, this was Sakaimatsu. The Matsuos on the border. The son of the family Takashi had gone missing, then when he was contacted by Takashi after some time had passed only to say they were moving and nothing else as they did.

"Shizuka-chan, you've come back have you?"

Matsuo Shizuka rose up and looked at Sadaichi with a nod.

"Where's the rest of your family? Takashi-kun---is your dad with you?"

When asked, Shizuka once again nodded. "Dad and Grandpa are with me. But grandma and mom are wives so they couldn't."

Sadaichi tilted his head. "What do you mean they're wives?"

MmMm, Shizuka shook her head. "Just your dad and your grandpa, huh? What about your little brother?"

"Jun couldn't either they said."

Sadaichi didn't know what Shizuka meant by the word "couldn't" that she kept repeating. He looked dubiously at the Sakaimatsu building. It was well lit up but there were no signs of people. As comfortably open as the house looked, it was so quiet as to be unsettling.

"Are your daddy and grandpa are awake?"

He thought he could greet them and ask about what had happened but Shizuka shook her head.

"They're out."

I see, he thought, thinking he'd come again tomorrow. He couldn't really get the gist of what Shizuka was saying.

"Don't be up playing too late now," Sadaichi said to her, starting to turn back.

"Hey," Shizuka called out to him. "Can I come over to your house to play?"

Sadaichi turned about. "At this hour?"

Sadaichi found himself feeling uneasy as Shizuka nodded. It

didn't make sense fo a child to be left home alone at this hour. To say nothing of the fact that the Sakaimatsus had come back unnaturally, it was even more unnatural that the entire family hadn't come back. On top of it all Shizuka saying she wanted to come over to play at this hour was odd.

Sadaichi was hard pressed for an answer. Shizuka gazed at Sadaichi with somehow piercing eyes, until she nodded.

"……I see. It's fine."

"Hn?"

"It's fine. Ojii-chan, you're the retired Tamo right? We've already got your place."

"What does---" that mean, he tried to ask, but Shizuka turned around and hurried into the house. Sadaichi gaped, but at the same time he'd felt a chill and hurried back to his house.

Sadaichi's house wasn't wide open and unlocked but even so the lights were on. Coming into the entryway, heading straight into the living room he saw his daughter-in-law at the low table with her chin in her hands. Unable to bring himself to ask her about the sad state of affairs when she looked so exhausted, Sadaichi passed quietly deeper into the house. The light was on in his grandson's room, his wife blinking up from where she sat at his bedside.

"Welcome home. ……How is he?" Tamo spoke to her, but his wife Kiyo shook her head. Their grandson Hiroya was laid out, breathing erratic. He muttered "water" as if in a delerium and Kiyo hurried to provide him with the cup.

sinnesspiel

3

That hard and weighty ceremony is over, Yuuki thought. Returning home from the temple, he sat in the living room at twilight as the sun set, at last letting out a sigh. He was grateful for Hirosawa's soothing but right then Yuuki didn't have the composure to accept it.

Yuuki's parents who had hurried in as soon as they'd received word of the death blamed him. He kidnapped their grandson far away where they couldn't reach him, then let him die they said. His parents greived that they couldn't see him when he had been on the brink of death. Why didn't they take him to the doctor when he was sick, why didn't he tell them right away, his parents swore at him, implicitly blaming Azusa as well. The question of why he didn't take him to the doctor pierced his chest more coldly than Yuuki's parents realized.

(Why……)

Really, why hadn't he contacted the doctor right away? Even if he'd called it wasn't something that the doctor could do anything about Yuuki reasoned earnestly with himself, but he couldn't escape the nagging doubt that said that if a doctor had seen him maybe he would have been saved. Indeed maybe Ozaki Toshio couldn't have done anything. But what about the University Hospital fitted with all its equipment? If he'd lived somewhere where he could have brought him there immediately. No, to start with if he hadn't moved to the village, if he'd stayed in the city, Natsuno likely wouldn't have died would he? Yuuki himself couldn't help but think that, and so he couldn't bear to hear his parents say as much against him too.

Azusa's parents had come quickly too but Azusa's parents didn't

get on well with Yuuki's. Azusa's parents had always shunned Yuuki to start with, and in their own way the seemed to be condemning her asking why she attached herself to a man like Yuuki. That antagonism came to ahead at the funeral, and funerals were hard enough even without that, making for an unbearably painful time. Both families restrained themselves, and both left the village without staying over, the only salvation to the situation being that they'd both left quickly.

The people who came put on an ostentatious show of compassion only to give reproachful eyes at the parents, asking silently why they didn't save him. The Tanaka siblings didn't say a word during the funeral, looking at Yuuki from far away with blame in their eyes.

---It's wretched for a parent to lose a child.

Yuuki thought that with a deep sigh.

Azusa watched Yuuki in that state. Sitting at the dining room watching Yuuki hang his head in shame, no particularly strong feelings welled up. Beyond feeling uneasy with herself in whom no emotions rose up, no other thoughts or feelings arose.

Azusa remained silent as she turned away towards the bedroom. It was lonely in the house, a very tangible hole, something missing. Her gait was uneasy. She felt terribly, dangerously exhausted. Bearing the dizziness to return to the bedroom, Azusa took out her travel suitcase. She packed minimal clothing and a minimal amount of daily necessities. She had prepared it last night. Looking it over she thought that it was somewhat underprepared.

Her checkbook and her seal, a voice whispered to her. Azusa couldn't call to mind why she would need them but she remembered that she would need them.

Her checkbook and seal, her credit cards, her insurance card, her driver's license. Half staggering, Azusa returned to the living room, returning to the bedroom with those. She stuffed them into the bag. And at the desk she wrote a letter. There wasn't anything she particularly wanted to write but she had accepted the fact that she

had to write one.

With glazed eyes she drug the pen over the paper. The letters were well written but Azusa herself couldn't draw together the focus to take in the things she had written.

I can't take it in this village.
You and the village, I can't put up with them anymore.
Goodbye.

Placing the pen above the pad she had written on, Azusa took her travel bag. When she left her room and went past Natsuno's room, a deep sadness she couldn't grasp the reason behind rose in her chest. For some reason she was sad. So much she felt displaced. And in walking away from the house, she was touched by a mysterious sense of pity towards somebody.

Feeling that way without any sense of emotion towards herself, Azusa left the house. The creaking of the door was slight but piercing, while the chilly touch of the low gate was merely bleak.

She walked along the pitch dark night road. Gradually her footsteps became more unsteady, melancholy. Walking just a little further ahead, there was a single car waiting in a place without any people. Azusa's feet came to a dazed stop near the car. The passenger side door opened to her.

"Come on," Tatsumi called out, holding the steering wheel, as Azusa entered the car. Why did she have to be there clutching her bag in the passenger's seat?

"Did you make all your preparations?"

When asked she nodded. With no reason, tears overflowed onto the back of her hand clutching her bag.

Tatsumi caught sight of that at the corner of his vision and smiled faintly. Without letting out much noise the car went off. Where? a mumbling voice was heard asking when they had been driving a bit.

"We're going to Mizobe. You have to do the paperwork to transfer

your son from school."

Aa, Azusa murmured. That was right. Tomorrow she would have to go to the high school to turn in the transfer notice.

(.....And where after that?)

As if spoken to by Azusa's thoughts, Tatsumi laughed lowly.

"After that you will be following after your son. .....Isn't that right?"

Azusa blinked, then nodded.

Yuuki at last noticed the fact that Azusa had disappeared that next day.

Sitting dumbfounded in the dinning room, he'd fallen asleep dead drunk in the living room and when he'd awoken on the sofa, the house was dead silent, leaving Yuuki with the feeling that he'd been left behind alone. That that was in fact the case, Yuuki at last realized when he peered into his bedroom.

There was a single page letter forsaking him. He hurried to look here and there but all of their valuables had disappeared. Come to think of it, Yuuki thought. Azusa's parents had stayed in Mizobe last night, and hadn't they said they'd be leaving early this morning? He didn't ask where they were staying but they must have intended to bring Azusa back with them, he realized, in a daze.

He wasn't shocked. Yuuki no longer had it in him to be all that hurt anymore.

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4

When Kaori came home from school, her father's shoes were in the entryway. Since he had been returning home late from work recently, Kaori thought, that's rare. "I'm home. Dad's back?"

When she poled her face into the kitchen to ask her mother, Sachiko's face was an embodiment of unpleasantry.

"Oh, he's back. He says he's sick," Sachiko said as if accusing him, while she washed a potato. "He was carried back by somebody from the government office. If he was that sick, he should have said so this morning."

Kaori watched her mother's obstinate back.

Her father was sick, is what she was saying. The day before yesterday, he went to the doctor's and came back, went to bed early, then he said the same thing yesterday, Sunday, not getting out of bed. Her mother's mood was horrible because of it. It seemed she thought that her father was avoiding her because of her being in a bad mood. He doesn't even have a slight fever, Sachiko accused her father.

"He could have just said something, but he has to make it seem like he's forcing himself, making a show of having someone from the office carry him back!"

Kaori wanted to butter up to her mother, to try to say something in his favor but the right words to do so wouldn't come to mind. And so without a word she left the kitchen.

It seemed Akira had come home too but there was no sign of him. She went up to the second story, put away her bad and changed out

of her uniform before peeking into the next door toom where Akira was lying down on his futon. He lifted his head to look up at Kaori but without a word he sullenly rolled back over.

Natuno was gone now. Yesterday he was buried in the temple graveyard. Kaori and Akira went to the funeral but Natsuno's father didn't even say anything to Kaori and Akira. No thanks for coming, nor with a word of apology for breaking his promise when he'd said he would let them know if anything changed. To have been something just completely not in his mind at all wounded Akira deeply.

Understanding her little brother's sentiment, Kaori side and slid the sliding screen door of his room shut. Heading back down the stairs, she next peered into her father's room. Her father was still laid out in his futon but unlike Akira he reallydid look to be sick. His color was poor, his breathing wild. She sat at a pillow at his bedside and felt her father's forehead where it seemed he had no fever. Her father faintly opened his eyes.

"Did I wake you? Sorry. How do you feel?"

Her father didn't say anything. He faintly nodded but what that was supposed to convey, Kaori didn't know. He just stretched out his hand, touching hers in a seemingly sympathetic way. Kaori gave a small smile.

"Get better soon, m'kay?"

Her father nodded, then closed his eyes again.

Her mother was still in a foul mood through dinner preparations. It had only gotten worse since word of Natsuno's death came and Akira ran out during dinner. Taking Akira's attitude about being rejected as sulking, thinking it was because she had been unhappy, there was also the fact that having said that their father wasn't sick, he said he was doing worse and she thought that he was using it to avoid her. And in the end, Kaori and Akira had neglected their yard chores to go to Natsuno's funeral, all of it spurring her poor mood on more than necessary.

Thanks to that there was a heavy air in the home. Her father didn't come out for dinner at all, Akira only took a superficial interest in dinner and sat quietly. Her mother, perhaps thinking that nobody had a mind to do anything to try to improve her mood, was building an even stormier temper. Kaori alone eagerly heaped praises on the dinner she didn't really taste as she shoveled it down, tried to help with the clean up, but it didn't do anything to curb the tide of Sachiko's upset.

When she returned to her room to go to bed early, she was worn to the core. Nestling into her futon and turning out the light, she could hear the wind. Natsuno died, she thought once again. Likely, it was retribution for having realized that Megumi had risen up.

Maybe it was because Natsuno had called and put their guard up, but there had been nobody who had come to visit Kaori or Akira. But Natsuno was dead. Their turn might be next.

Thinking of that she was afraid. More than that, while she knew that Natsuno was dead, knowing that they might have let him die was painful. They couldn't do anything. It was sad. Wasn't there some way they could have done something, if the two of them had just been a little more clever, mightn't they have been able to save Natsuno? Or was it the case that no matter how they struggled, they couldn't have done anything? ---Wasn't that how death was?

Blaming herself for various things, eyes wide open, no matter how much she tossed and turned in her futon she couldn't sleep. The sight of her displeased mother's back, her bedridden father, her dejected little brother, a number of things rose in sequence to mind and out, each coloring her with their own strange tint of urgency that remained in her. It was when she was unable to bare it and thought about just getting up that it came.

Kon

, a light, sharp sound.

Kaori sat up. The sound came again. It was from the window, a sound like somebody tapping on the storm shutter.

(That, shouldn't be)

Kaori was on the second story. Her window was above the entryway roof, so it wasn't as if there were no place to stand, it wasn't impossible to climb the tree in the front yard to the entryway (in fact, Akira had proven so a number of times) but even so, there was the time of night to think of.

Kaori turned her eyes to the bedside clock. It was near one in the morning.

Kon

, came another tap on the storm shutter. Was it possibly Akira? Had he snuck out of his room and been locked out? In the past they had never locked their doors before going to bed but just when did they start? At some point her mother had begun locking up here and there at night (come to think of it, when did she herself start closing her storm shutter.....?). Since they had suddenly started always doing it, if he slipped out of his room in the night, he wouldn't be able to get back in would he, she thought.

".....Is that you Akira?" Kaori rose up and neared the window. When she called out, the sound stopped. She had been about to open the window.

"....'s dead, you know."

That was when the voice spoke from just outside the storm shutter. Kaori literally sprang up, holding her breath on the spot.

It was a hushed girl's voice. ----A girl?

(No, this is)

"Did you hear me? Kaori."

Kaori stuffed her fist into her mouth, stiffling down the scream that rose up. That was without a doubt Megumi's voice. Shiver rose throughher. Her teeth rattled together.

"Your father's dead, just so you know."

Just beyond the storm shutter, there were signs of a person moving.

"……Serves you right."

Kaori let out a short scream. She couldn't bear it. Desperately she felt for the light and turned it on. Her room was as it had alwaysbeen, without anything warped or out of place, nothing had changed.

Kaori stepped quickly out of there. Without knowing what to do, hesitating over her next move, before she knew it she had flown out of her room and into Akira's. When she turned on the light, Akira was sleeping.

"Akira, …… Wake up!"

It seemed his sleep was light. After shaking him twice, three times, Akira's face lifted in protest.

"Megumi! ---Megumi is"

Akira rose up with a snap. "……What?"

"Megumi was there. Outside the window. ……Dad's dead, she said."

"But that's,"

"I'm sure it was Megumi's voice!"

Akira pushed the futon cover aside. He rushed out of the room. Kaori followed after him, down the stairs. When they went into their parents room, there were two futons. One had a person in it, but the other was empty. Kaori went towards the bathroom inside, Akira went towards the tatami room beyond their bedroom. Kaori had not quite peered in the washroom when Akira screamed.

Kaori hurried back. Entering the dark tatami room, she could see the veranda sliding door and the storm shutter were opened. Akira

was crouched in the yard, a person collapsed at his feet.

"Daddy, ... Dad!"

Akira shook his father. The waning moon's light fell over them. In that relatively bright light, his father's eyes were faintly open, and she could see him half outside laid out half on the porch. Kaori too knelt at his side and joined him in nudging their father. Their father didn't so much as twitch.

(He's dead.....)

He was really dead.

"Serves you right, Megumi said."

Kaori gripped at Akira's arms.

"---But why?!"

Akira's eyes were wide as if he'd been struck. But before he could open his mouth, a questioning voice rang out as their mother entered the tatami room.

Sachiko was awoken by the noise and with it the height of her foul mood had arose. Kids making a ruckus at this hour. There were times when Sachiko thought of those children she bore herself as intolerable.

Getting out of her futon and towards the veranda, that was when she heard her daughter scream. She couldn't make out what she was saying but her voice was pressing and urgent. Finally thinking that much strange, Sachiko caught sight of her fallen husband.

Her children claimed, while crying, that Yoshikaze was dead. Sachiko thought it looked like her husband was dead too, but that wasn't right, she thought. There was no way he was dad, but really, it was undeniable that he was in very bad condition. Sachiko felt angry in a way she couldn't play. For some reason, she felt terribly betrayed by something, as if something were trampling on her.

At any rate, she hurried to the phone, thinking to call an

ambulance. No, with her husband in that state, it would probably be faster to contact the Ozaki Hospital, wouldn't it?

(He shouldn't be dead.)

But none the less, there was no doubt it was a race against time. At an rate somebody had to treat him as soon as possible. When thinking she would contact the Ozaki hospital after all, Sachiko opened the address book and took the phone in hand. At that moment, she noticed a business card attached to the wall by the phone stand.

"What is this?" Sachiko asked of her blue faced children that followed her. It said Ebuchi Clinic. Kaori spoke up.

"A doctor. It's the hospital Dad went to."

"Dad did?

"Yeah. He had an appointment ticket."

Then did her husband stick this here?

"Then it'd be better to call them, I'm sure. They should know about Dad," Akira said, and so Sachiko nodded. Beneath the clinic number was neatly written Emergency Contact, with another phone number written beneath that. Strangely reassured by those words, Sachiko called. As soon as she called, somebody picked up. It was so quick that Sachiko didn't know how to convey the situation, still lost for words.

"Uhm.... I'm sorry for the hour... That is, this is Tanaka, but."

Ah, the voice on the other end spoke with recognition. "Tanaka Yoshikazu-san's family, is it? Could it be that something has happened to Yoshikazu-san?"

"Yes," Sachiko said sounding as if she thought they were saved. "He's collapsed. Uhm..."

How to explain her husband's condition, Sachiko sought for the words but before she could find them, the person said "I'll see him

right away."

Sachiko hung up the phone. The ringing of the front doorbell was really right away after that.

"It is Ebuchi," that aging man said, heading in towards the tatami room where he was lead. Without knowing what to do she put down a cushion beside her husband, and Ebuchi took to his knees beside him and began examining his body. Sachiko and the children sat on either side of him, absorbed in what he did. Ebuchi didn't take much time.

"I'm sorry to say that he has passed on. It was acute heart failure, I daresay."

Ebuchi spoke as if apologetic. Kaori's voice rang out in a sob. As Sachiko sat watching him dumbfounded before him, Ebuchi took out the official documents and began to write. He smoothly handed it over to Sachiko. It was her husband's death certificate.

"But that's....."

It couldn't be that her husband was dead. Since this summer, there had been death after death here and there, but to think it would really come to them, she never even dreamed of it.

That's right, Ebuchi said to Sachiko who sat with the paper in her heand, dumbfounded, as he took out another sheet. "Actually you see, your husband has made arrangements with the Sotoba Funeral Home?"

"Sotoba---Funeral Home?"

Sachiko was intensely bewildered. She wasn't that familiar with even the concept of a funeral home, she didn't know the village had one. She couldn't understand why her husband would make arrangements with them, much less why the doctor, Ebuchi, would no about it, why he would bring the documents to show to her, and on top of all of that she wondered why he had that document at all, all of it was beyond her understanding.

Ebuchi smiled as if sympathetic. "They are called the Sotoba

Funeral Home but you didn't know? So to speak, we are a mutual aid group. My offices assist with their duties you see. Perhaps your husband thought that things would come to this, for he has made arrangements. It was the day he first came, wasn't it? As you can see."

Sachiko's eyes fell to the paper. It looked to be a copy, and on it was indeed the necessary information written in her husband's handwriting, with his seal on it.

"My..... Why would he do this?"

"I wonder?" Ebuchi smiled. "He had seen the pamphlet, it must have interested him I suppose?"

"But, we don't need it. There's the mourning crew. .....That's right, I have to contact the Care Manager."

When Sachiko rose, Ebuchi said is that so, as if disappointed. "Well, of course, you aren't obligated to it, but. It's just, well, it would be quite the waste. If I recall, your husband has already paid the contracting fees."

"Contracting fees?"

"Indeed. Not that I know the specifics. But I'm certain he made the down payment. When I introduced him to Hayami-san--the manager of the Funeral Home, he had paid the money then. If you speak to the Funeral Home, I'm sure not all of it has already been spent on arrangements for the funeral, but. Well, it's up to you if you'd like to treat it as scrap paper."

"That's just....."

What took hold of Sachiko was a feeling called doubt. Something about this doctor was strange. She shouldn't just trust in this contract, she felt. In the first place, her husband wouldn't have likely paid what was sure to be no small fee without consulting Sachiko.

That's what she thought but Sachiko stood up. She went to the bedroom and opened the drawer, taking out the bank book. What

she saw inside shocked her. Three days ago, one 3,000,000 yen deposit was withdrawn.

"This can't be!"

Sachiko's eyes widened. This much, she thought. And then she felt outrage. ---What a selfish thing to do. Sachiko returned to the seating cushion. She was sitting before Ebuchi.

"That contract, it can't be cancelled?"

"I don't think that it cannot be, but. It's just, while it depends on the terms of the contract, I don't believe that full refunders are terrible common, you see."

"But that's... This is something my husband did himself without consulting me at all! We don't need a funeral home. The village has the Mourning Crew. If we use the Mourning Crew, it wouldn't cost such a ridiculous amount."

Ebuchi gave a bitter smile. "You will have to discuss that with Hayami-san. Even if you tell it to me, I cannot do much. Well, if you wish to break the contract, I think it would be best to be quick about it. There's a contact number written there, I suggest you perhaps try calling him. ---Well, then."

Ebuchi stood up. Sachiko showed him out and went straight to the telephone. Sachiko's speed was spurred on by rage at her husband just flippantly up and doing whatever he wanted.

(Without a single word to me, just doing something like this...)

She couldn't forgive such a thing.

At this number too, someone picked up immediately. When Sachiko gave her name, the pattern of the person seeming to know who she was immediately was the same too.

"I'd like to cancel the contract. It's something my husband did on his own."

"That will unfortunately be a problem." a man's yawn-like voice

replied. "In that case, we will still take the commission charges, will that be a problem?"

The commission charges were a hefty fee, Sachiko understood him to mean.

"Then, I'll prepare the paperwork, so please come by with your husband."

Sachiko at first started to nod, but then once again remembered that that wasn't possible.

"Uhm..... My husband is dead."

That's right, her husband was dead, she realized belatedly in a daze. Suddenly, he died, and he was still left in the tatami room.

"My that is a problem," Hayami said. "If you look at the contract I am sure you will see it says as much, but if the one who signed it has already died, then the contract can no longer be terminated."

"----Eh?"

"You see..... It is a contract for a funeral after all? If your husband has passed on, he cannot cancel the contract anymore. Of course, you're quite free to throw the contract away, but in this case, we will not be able to refund the deposit, you see."

"But that's! This was my husbands own selfish,"

"However, your husband made a contract you see. It has his stamp and everything, you see. If you make use of us for your funeral, then we do have a system by which we can square the accounts with the initial deposit, and return any extra fees as a gift to you, but."

But that's, Sachiko once again mumbled. Hayami explained the system to the wordless Sachiko. The words largely went in one ear and out the other but even the bewildered Sachiko could understand that if she abandoned the contract she would be out a considerable about, and that on the other hand if she used the funeral home, there wouldn't be too great a loss.

"What shall you do?" Hayami asked in his yawny voice. Sachiko nodded.

"I understand. I will depend on you."

I see, said Hayami, his voice sounding as if he were licking his lips. "Then, I shall be right over."

Sachiko breathed a sigh and hung up the phone. Sachiko saw Kaori standing in the living room doorway. What is it, she asked, only for Kaori to collapse into herself running off. She could hear her footsteps echoing up towards the second story.

Sachiko tilted her head and returned to the tatami room. At some point, a futon had been brought in. It must have been from the bedroom. Her husband was laid out in the futon. She couldn't say it was done well or flatteringly. He was diagonal on the futon without any sheet over it and disheveled. Her husband's body was still clad in his wrinkled pajamas, a comforter thrown over him, with Akira on top of him crying.

Sachiko sighed.

"We'll have to get him into a yukata. --Or don't we need to do that? Now help me with this. We should at least do it properly. The futon's a mess, isn't it!"

"Leave him alone!"

At Akira's outcry, Sachiko's brows furrowed.

"Mom just has to worry about money!"

Sachiko stool bolt upright.

"Me and Kaori did our best, so it's fine like this! Even Dad'd probably say that this's fine! It's way better than being stretched out over cusions!"

Akira clung to his father's body. Akira himself wanted to do it right too. But his father's body was heavy. He couldn't just manhandle him like some object when doing it, so even when he

and Kaori put their all into it, this was as much as they could do.

"……What is this attitude of yours," Sachiko said, so angry she now felt nauseous. "Do you know how much a funeral costs?! With your father dead, how do you think we're going to get by from now on? That father of yours, taking out such a deposit! That money was for your future---"

"Shut up! Get away. Don't touch him!"

"I see. Then just do whatever you want. When the man from the Funeral Home comes, the one who's going to be seen in a sorry state and be thought poorly of is going to be your father after all."

Akira didn't answer. Sachiko returned to the living room, shaking with anger. She then let out a crying yell.

It wasn't long at all after that that Hayami from the Funeral Home had come. Hayami came with two younger men, all saying their words of condolence in unison. He brought out the orginal contract, pointed out the claus and explained it to her.

At first she had been irresponsible about it, but as she'd heard more of Hayami's explanation, she felt some sort of malice to its contents.

"Uhm…… What was that, just now?"

Hayami's slender eyes narrowed. Hayami was a small man in his fifties, with narrow eyes that always seemed to be laughing. On the other hand, no real emotion was conveyed in them.

"As I was saying, your husband requested a non-religious service, so there will be no monk nor posthumous name."

"Oh, no. That won't do."

"Even if you say it won't do, that is how it will have to be," Hayami said, with an expression that seemed to be smiling with enjoyment.

"Rather, if it doesn't suit you, you're quite free to abandon the

contract, but. Yes, indeed, we will suffer no losses that way."

Sachiko kept silent.

"And so there we have it, there will not be an altar either. Well, of course for the memorial service there will be an solemnly decorated altar. However it will be very different from a normal altar from a Buddhist ritual."

"Then there won't be any chanting of sutras? No burning incense?"

"Yes. Rather than sutras, we will be playing somber music. Rather than burning incense, the attendants will offer flowers, as this will be done as an act of individuals parting from him, they will bring their own."

"I see.... Is that right."

"You needn't worry a bit. It will not be seen unfavorably when compared to a Buddhist ceremony. During the flower offering, there will be a light show in the meeting hall, it'll be, how to put it, like shining a spotlight on each of their faces!"

Sachiko's face twisted in disgust. Without paying her any mind, Hayami continued on proudly. "And once each flower offering is over, his honorable family shall hammer the nail into the coffin, and at the end, that coffin, yes? It will be eased down, down...."

"---Ha?"

Hayami's eyes narrowed.

"Like I've been saying, there's what's called a snapping turtle door in stage terms, you see?"

"Uhm, are we really doing something so exaggerated? As you can see, our living room is---"

"Oh dear me nooo," Hayami laughed. "Madame, it really will be a problem if you aren't listening! The grounds shall not be here, but at our funeral home's funeral parlor!"

That's here in the contract, Hayami added on.

"Then I guess it can't be helped but, but, such a gaudy display..."

"Even if you say that, this is what is written into the contract you see. It'll be quite the problem if you don't allow it," Hayami said, eyes narrowing. His face looked strangely uneasy. "----Our offices have already made the arrangements, you see."

For some reason Sachiko felt a chill. Maybe it was because her children weren't at her side, but somehow she felt very small.

"From here, we will carry your husband out. ---Oh, have no worries. From the washing and dressing of the body to placing it into the coffin, we will be seeing to all of it. The vigil will start at six o'clock, the funeral home will be left open, so please do use it as long as you like. There is a waiting room for relatives and a sleeping room as well, and you may change clothing there. Of course, you're free to stay the night but the funeral service will be in the evening, and so."

Eh, Sachiko said, looking to Hayami's face. Hayami's eyes sharply narrowed. "Did I not state as much? The circumstances of the show? The funeral will be tomorrow at six. We will be hosting the event at our place of business. This is so that those who have work may attend with ease. Because it will be a burial, we'll prepare an illumination even to the graveyard. Those who accompany the body out to the fields will carry lights shaped like candles and---"

"Please don't, that's just---"

"That is what is in the contract, you see." Hayami was smiling but there was something about him that seemed strangely as if he would not allow refusal. Sachiko felt another chill and, with no other choice, she nodded.

"Well then, I will now take custody of your husband."

Hayami said, directing to the young men who appeared to be his assistants. The two brought out what looked like a stretcher from the car, put her husband on it, and carried him to the car. They

were so good at it it was strange, without giving Sachiko even a chance to say goodbye to him.

"---And so, at the funeral hall."

Hayami lowered his hat courteously.

In something of a daze, Sachiko returned to the tatami room. In the growing light before the break of dawn, her husband's bed clothes were left behind like a dsicarded skin.

Her husband was gone. He would never be returning to the house now. He was carried off by Hayami and his men.

Sachiko had the strange feeling that it was as if her husband had been pillaged away.

sinnesspiel

5

On October 17th, the first call of the day that came to the temple office was, on that day too, as expected, a death notice. Seishin had a bad feeling when he picked up the phone. Tamo Sadaichi's grave voice conveyed that Tamo Hiroya had passed away.

"This morning, he was getting worse and worse. We called an ambulance when he went into convulsions but he didn't make it to the hospital."

Is that so, Seishin back channelled to him before giving words of condolence.

"Thank you very kindly. However, it isn't as if our home alone could avoid misfortunes. Rather, we've been extraordinarily fortunate not to have had a death come to our family until now. Well, it's impossible not to think it would have been better if it weren't a high schooler like Hiroya but someone older like myself or Baa-san, but."

That restrained voice dug into Seishin. Even with the deaths continuing in the village, that didn't lessen the pain of loss in one's own family. However, that death was spreading through the village like a disease was already that distinctly unmistakable. Even while knowing that, Seishin did nothing. He stayed holed up in the temple, idly wasting his time.

Tamo Hiroya was in his second year of high school, in eleventh grade. Having come and gone at Tamo's house many times, of course he knew him. Sadaichi and his wife Kiyo had brought him along with them often to help out at the temple too. He was a lively and polite young boy. That boy Hiroya was dead, he thought

painfully, thinking that such a tragedy should not have happened. But there was the possibility that Hiroya would rise. Knowing the kind of byo Hiroya was, he couldn't help but think that it would be unforgivable to thrust him back into the grave a second time.

Seishin covered his face in both hands. As he did, the phone rang again. When he picked up the receiver, it was Toshio. Toshio indifferently conveyed Tokujirou's death. He didn't have any particular words of blame nor sarcasm. That only made him feel even more guilty. While all of this was happening, moment by moment the damage was spreading. Are you seeing all this while keeping your silence, he had the feeling Toshio was asking.

"The phone rang just now didn't it?" Mitsuo peeked into the temple office. Seishin nodded.

"Sadaichi-san's place's Hiroya-kun and the Yasumori's Tokujirou-san seem to have died."

Is that right, Mitsuo mumbled, resignation in his voice, then shaking his head. "Junior Monk, what are we going to do in this case?"

"In this case?"

"The Mourning Crew. Tokujirou-san was the care manager, wasn't he? Since it's that very Tokujirou who's dead, normally it would pass on to Sadaichi-san. However, Sadaichi-san is also..."

Aa, Saishin mumbled. Since the Sadaichi household also had a misfortune, Sadaichi could not be the care manager.

"And Maruyasu are relatives, aren't they?"

At Mitsuo's bewildered question, Seishin gave an equally bewildered nod. Going by ranking, after Sadaichi would be the sawmill's Yasumori Kazuya but the Maruyasu Sawmill were relatives of Tokujirou. They'd be performing the funeral. Likewise, the Tamo relatives couldn't take their place. This was, as far as Seishin could remember, the first time something like this had happened.

"I will try consulting with father. I have to tell him about what happened to Tokujirou-san as it is."

"That's right," Mitsuo said, discouraged. "No doubt it will depress him. After all, that gentle head monk had completely changed personalities in demanding to go pay him a sick visit."

Seishin nodded and with a heavy feeling turned to part. Calling out to his father in his sickbed, he reported on Tokujirou's death. Shinmei who was laid atop the bed with an open book turned to look at Seishin, and then murmured "I see," lowly. He didn't seem to be particularly shocked, nor to be mourning. As expected, his father had gone to Tokujirou to say his goodbye during that sick visit, he realized.

"And also, Sadaichi-san's place's Hiroya-kun. In this case, who would become responsible, I wonder?"

Shinmei looked to be in thought for a time and then, shortly after, said to consult with Takemura Gohei. Seishin nodded, and then, mentally tilting his head at his father's seeming disinterest, went on to consult with him further about the details. As he departed the room, he met with Miwako, her expression unusual.

"Seishin, Tokujirou-san has---"

Yes, Seishin nodded.

"What ever could this be? And Tamo-san's place's grandson too, they've said?"

"Yes."

"What will you do?"

Asked that by Miwako, Seishin blinked.

"What will I do?"

With a pale face, Miwako ushered Seishin into a nearby room. "Will you go to the service? You can't not go?"

Seishin was bewildered. "What are you asking? Of course I must--"

"Even so, with as busy as it may be here lately, I wonder if you couldn't have a nearby temple substitute for you? I mean, Tsurumi-san's condition is also poor after all. There are only you and Ikebe-kun, and for two separate houses, there's no way to do it is there?"

"Yes, that is why I will discuss it with them, as we have no choice but to ask one to move things back a day, that is also what Father has said."

"That would be rude to the deceased. Please have someone in from a neighboring temple. That would be more sensible for everyone."

Seishin tilted his head and looked at Miwako. Miwako looked away nervously.

"It isn't as if I'm saying this because I don't want you to go. .....Of course I know that you must go. But."

Seishin stared with penetrating coldness at Miwako as she cut herself off and turned away covering her face. "But..... It's finally come to the point where there is nobody left at the contractor's. Tamo-san's place has finally had a funeral. I know that Tokujirou-san and Sadaichi-san have taken care of us. I know that. But, if you don't get a little more rest,"

"Mother,"

"There still has not been the ceremony to officially transfer you to the position as head of the temple," Miwako cried. "If you fall here, what will happen to the parishioners? If the worst happens, if the head of this temple and the head priest pass on, I'll..."

Seishin felt something unnecessarily bitter in his mouth.

".....I'm being careful enough."

"But there are rumors of an epidemic too!"

"It is fine. I really am being careful enough. I know where I stand. I know where you stand as well. So please do not worry."

Comforting Miwako who collapsed into tears, Seishin went straight back to the temple office. That heavy bitterness lurked in his chest, and having no place of refuge from it was painful.

He couldn't blame Miwako. Seishin had no siblings. Seishin couldn't imagine how much shame Miwako must have bore until he was born. Even now Shinmei had yet to be relieved of his obligation as the head priest, Seishin had no wife, and it must have been shameful not to have a successor yet. The head priest's wife was expected to support the temple from within the family. With Shinmei falling ill, with Seishin being as he was, it wasn't hard to imagine that Miwako harbored feelings of not carrying out that duty of hers well enough.

Miwako bore the same burden of expectations as himself, and while the expectation itself was by no means pressuring him, he did have the desire to meet that expectation, and aware that he could not, those unspoken expectations could warp into an unspoken menace at any moment, Seishin knew that well.

But---said a part of him that was disappointed in Miwako. When before a spectacle as terrible as this, was that all that she could talk of, was that all that she could think of, he couldn't help thinking. He understood that thinking such was unreasonable towards Miwako. But even while knowing that, there was a part of him he was aware of, wanting to say is that the kind of person you are.

He knew. Seishin was not Miwako. Miwako didn't know the real circumstances. She could only imagine, but she had no way to confirm or deny whatever she imagined. That was how isolated people were from each other. He understood Miwako's position but he thought, is this really the time for that? But it was arrogant to think that. It wasn't the time to think that. But he was at his wits end unable to avoid thinking it. In other words, Seishin had an understanding towards Miwako but that was indeed not enough.

(Even so……)

Seishin understood that he couldn't control it. Why could someone like him understand others?

Seishin himself didn't know why he chose death. That wasn't all, he couldn't understand why his stumbling blocks were not like anyone else's. He didn't know why it was that while he could not forgive actions they could not help taking, and yet he harbored deep affections for Miwako and Toshio.

(In terms of people, the one who I'm most lost about may be myself.)

And then his cognizances of other people, their reflection would warp in his heart. Something lurked and warped his heart, something he couldn't control, something whose true form he should not have been able to grasp. So of course neither Toshio nor Miwako could understand it. That isolated feeling of not being understood had him angered at even himself, he thought.

(I'm sure probably.... that he's the same.)

He still didn't

know why he killed his little brother. That wasn't all he didn't understand. Why was his little brother following him, the reason to that he also didn't know.
The reason he couldn't understand that was, ultimately, because he hadn't understood his brother while he had been alive, there was no doubt. In truth, he couldn't remember his little brother very clearly as anything but a Shiki.

(My reality is nothing more than overlapping, crammed cognizances reflected in a warped mirror.....)

When Seishin thought of "Miwako," the unconscious expectation of "wanting him to be like this" was cast over the reflection of "Miwako." When Seishin imagined Miwako,

When he turned back to look at his little brother,

the Miwako he called to mind was only the illusion to which he put the name "Miwako" and nothing more, wasn't it?

he first tried to remember the form he had hidden beneath hemp robes. Beneath them should have been his corpse desecrated by mercilessly, violently inflected wounds but strangely he couldn't remember what his unchanged form should have looked like.

It was possible that Seishin had never so much as once seen Miwako herself.

Or perhaps. he turned his eyes away from his little brother's husk, he had never once looked at him straight on.
His little brother who had become a Shiki had no wounds. He was just blue and faded, he was more like a ghost than a dead body that had risen up but he was clearly corporeal material, he didn't look like the phantoms of the evil spirits that dwelt in the wilderness.
It was just that he remembered his own actions. In the clarity of twilight, he attacked his little brother in the fields. He had a hoe in hand. Driven by an impulse with no reason he attacked, and afterwards he was terrified at his action, and he added to the destruction as if to completely exterminate his brother and with that to bury his own act.
That might have been exactly what it was he thought. To tell the truth, he didn't have any memory of the exact moment. As if swept up in a fever, his awareness was narrowed, splendidly colored over with a destructive hue, and then all he remembered was the sad and gloomy feedback-sensation that came countless times.
Even his little brother's blood smeared corpse left only a vague impression on his memories. Rust red specks of blood spread out over the surrounding grass. That alone he could remember with strange clarity. He remembered the feel and the weight of his little brother's remains as he dragged them into the bushes, that leaving the bushes behind him seemed to lack a certain sense of reality, all of it was so vague and unclear that if he

tried to remember his little brother and the highs and lows beneath the hemp cloth, what came to mind was a statue vision of him as he turned in surprise to face his brother when realizing he'd been struck with a weapon.
Many times did he try to draw out that statue and see the details, to look into his turning little brother's face, to see malice towards himself, to see a grudge that would drive him to revenge, or possibly even lamenting his own fate, he looked for that as well as he surveyed him but he couldn't see any of those things. Just like the Shiki, his eyes were unfeeling, colorless empty hollows, just eyes opened in shock, thinking of nothing but turning to face him. And at the same time strangely in that moment he remembered his own face warped by overwhelming, murderous intent and madness as if he remembered himself reflected in those eyes more clearly than his little brother's face.
---Why.
He asked the man with furrowed brows but of course the man could not think of anything. It seemed as if that mouth were open to scream something, but the voice that screamed was not within his memory. In truth, he didn't remember if he himself had screamed. He just had his mouth open as if screaming, and instead of screaming he may have swung his weapon.

(Reality is not a single definite thing for anybody.....)

People were somber beings.

They were in the darkness of unilluminating ignorance from which they could not escape.

sinnesspiel

6

He shouldn't have seen anything besides darkness from the veranda. There was Atsushi, in the corner of what was half a balcony half a laundry drying area with a can in hand. He smoked a cigarette that didn't even taste that good and dropped the ashes into a beer can he'd swiped from the store.

He didn't remember when he'd started smoking tabacco in this usual style. He hid on the veranda at night, ashing into a beer can. Now that he was past twenty, there probably wasn't any need for him to hide his smoking anymore like he'd used to but since his grandmother Namie hated tobacco, he continued his habit of hiding it like this.

That he was so pathetic was something he thought of with annoyance. It was like he couldn't handle his grandma's angry face. But Namie was noisy. It wasn't going to be any fun to get a sermon and it wasn't pleasant when she went into shrill hysterics about them being victims whose health was sacrificed in the end either. Ultimately then his father would be called and his ass would go off on him about his rebellion, asking if he didn't have any consideration for other people, fault finding and all. Then the programme would become one where his dad hit him.

(.....Old bat.)

Atsushi didn't get a taste of anything that should be a part of life. Ever since he was born it'd all gone down hill, and it was still rolling. These days there were a lot of funerals in the village. People he knew died, or they moved out. The delivery guy had changed and the village wouldn't calm down. So what, Atsushi thought, but his dad didn't seem to like that. There's rules in this world, he'd

been grumbling a lot lately. And they're being trampled under foot, his dad screamed. And the one to eat his left-over rage was always Atsushi.

Whatever was going on with the village wasn't any business of Atsushi's. That got his father angry, and thanks to that Atsushi would take the rage. Atsushi kept getting the short end of the stick like that. Whenever in the course of things his dad was angry, Matsumura would make a blunder. The blowback from that came to Atsushi too. At least at those times his mother would complain to his father, then his grandmother would decide to run her mouth. She would flaunt his little brother and little sister like they were perfect, compare him to them, and then once again he'd be yelling at Atsushi. Everyone was forcing all kinds of bad luck onto him.

(If people're gonna be dyin' anyway, the hell can't it take care of those assholes?)

His dad, his mom, his grandma and his siblings, how refreshing it'd be if they were all gone. If that happened, Atsushi would have the store's money, then he'd get out of this sickening village. Fantasizing about that was fun. Not being able to do anything but fantasize was annoying. When one consented to imagining something impossible, then beneath that image was always the hidden fact that it was impossible. .....Should he clear them all out with his own hand?

While riding the fence on that issue, he felt something swirling in his stomach and giving him goosebumps. His head felt pretty good when he pursued the thought, and then his stomach squirmed with fear. Maybe Atsushi enjoyed playing around with that strange feeling that seemed to be snapping his body apart.

With that strange feeling, he looked out into the night without really seeing. Beneath the veranda was the alleyway beside the store, and the store warehouse faced the alleyway. Within that alleyway was a back stairway that went up directly to the second story. There wasn't anything to see from there. Sometimes a stray cat would come through and that was about it. Even those stray cats he hadn't seen lately.

And yet something made a noise. Something like a woman's high heels, thin and hard. Atsushi slightly turned his body, peeking down between the hand railings. A single woman's figure was there in the alleyway entrance, peering up as if peeking into the alleyway.

".....Good evening."

The woman smiled. She was older than Atsushi, and a woman he hadn't seen before. She was dressed flashily, with an air of importance to her mannerisms. She wasn't like the women in the village. He could easily guess who she was.

"It's been quite some time since I've seen anybody out at night," the woman said approaching the area directly beneath the veranda and looking straight up at him. ".....What are you doing?"

"Nothin'," Atsushi answered with a mumble.

"Bed time comes early in this village, doesn't it?"

"They're all a bunch of cowards. They say the nights're scary or some shit."

My, the woman laughed. "But you don't mind it do you? You're a brave one."

Damn right, Atsushi said showing a smile.

"I wonder if you would come down and give me someone to talk to perhaps?"

"You come on up. There's a staircase further back."

"May I?"

Atsushi nodded. A warped smile rose up. Yes, Atsushi wasn't afraid of the night. There shouldn't be anything dangerous in the night. And a woman definitely wasn't dangerous. She seemed like a particularly weak woman of luxiry.

---That's right, there shouldn't be anything dangerous.

"Might be more dangerous for a woman," Atsushi mumbled with a smile to himself.

sinnesspiel

7

The moonlight beamed down a white glow. The darkness beneath the grove of trees was blue, a melancholy field of view.

Nao stopped on her way down the slope and for a time looked between the mountains, the village and the night sky. The wind blew. There was enough wind to sway her hair. The blue tinted scene held the hue of autumn, and while what she saw imparted an unpleasant chill to her psyche, Nao herself didn't particularly feel any cold in the air. The blue darkness lacked the depth of a true dark. In the same way Nao's world had lost a certain sense of depth since she had woken in a shack ni Yamairi.

Nao went tottering down the hill. Following the familiar lumber road, she came out from the northern mountain. On the way she met with mountain dogs who made menacing growls but strangely the beasts did not attack Nao. They only made threats, they never so much as approached her.

She was avoided even by wild dogs. Yes, she murmured in her heart as she came to the village, seeing a nostalgic home from far away, and a light on there.

Nao's feet stopped. A paper lantern hung before the house. The crest on the lantern was drawn with white contours, unfilled on black, meaning it was a mourning lamp. --Then, Nao thought gripping the edges of her collar. Tokujirou was dead.

(.....Father-in-law.)

Nao ran into the village. --Susumu, Mikiyasu, Setsuko. Of all of them, not a single one had risen up with her. Would Tokujirou rise

up? If at least only Tokujirou would, then he would at least stay by her side.

While going far away as if fleeing, that won't happen, Nao found herself thinking. Nobody thus far in the family had risen up. Surely Tokujirou too, would be going to where Mikiyasu and the others had ended up going, to a place of ease and rest, leaving her her alone.

Yasumori Nao was raised by her uncle and his wife. Her real father abandoned Nao when she was six and ran off to somewhere. She hadn't seen him since then. She didn't know the circumstances of how or where he was at all.

The one to take her in was her mother's older brother, and Nao did not get on with her uncle and his wife well. They were by no means cruel nor oppressive but Nao knew all too well that her uncle and his wife were not her real parents. Nao wanted her parents. She wanted a warm family. She wanted those who would accept her unconditionally, a house where she belonged. Mikiyasu was the one to give her that.

Her beloved son and husband, kind inlaws. Nao thought of Setsuko as her real mother. She thought of Tokujirou as her real father. That was why she wanted them with her.

(.....And yet.)

Cold tears went along her face. By that Nao couldn't help being aware that she had no body heat.

Not Susumu, Not Mikiyasu, and not even Setsuko rose up. And perhaps Tokujirou would not rise either. That Nao could rise was because of the nature she inherited from her real mother and father. Drowning themselves in liquor and gambling debts, getting involved in some kind of fraud or swindle they abandoned Nao, and it was from such a couple that she'd inherited such bad genes. So surely, that was why she had become such a creature, without a doubt.

---It's not your fault, Nao-chan.

Mikiyasu didn't have the trait to rise up so that he could say that for her and absolve her existence. He didn't have such bad genes. So he wouldn't become some kind of being that extended its life by killing others. No doubt his eyes were still gently closed, still meeting with others in a place of tranquility, within a gentle sleep. Nao could never get there.

(How come?)

Why did she become something like this? While striking a tree she left the village, looking to the light at Maruyasu. In the lumberyard were the same well organized piles of lumber and left behind track marks of the trucks and forklifts that had been there that summer when Nao still had warm blood flowing through her.

There were no sounds of insects. There was no scent of the summer grass. There were no welcoming Bon pyres for their ancestors, and she could not hear the voices of gathered visiting relatives.

(The one who told them to please come and visit was me.)

Indeed it was Nao and she had said that. After that the man had, just as he had promised, come to visit Nao's house. Late in the night----with a man accompanying him. That lethargic faced, seedy looking mad said that he was Gotouda Shuuji.

(That man--that bastard!)

If only he hadn't come. No, if she hadn't so carelessly called out to Seishirou herself in the first place.

(His mother didn't rise up either.)

Nao's face furrowed. That was the only saving grace in this. Shuuji's mother was truly dead---and knowing it was none other than he who had killed her, he'd gone to pieces. He remembered piercing her with shame and guilt, unable to pull himself out of it, he was now no different from some crippled invalid. That empty and squalid man attacked her. He separated her eternally from her warm and welcoming home.

(A man like that!)

Tokujirou wouldn't rise, quite possibly. Nao's precious family, not a one of them had those terrible genes like Nao--like that man had. That was why they left Nao behind, rotting in peace.

She hated her parents that endowed her with this property. She hated Seishirou, Shuuji. More than anything she hated herself.

----And.

Nao cried as she looked down on Maruyasu. Sleeping beneath the tiled roof.

(Even though Jun-chan was there with me when I invited Seishirou.)

Even though they were the same, they weren't the same. She still had a warm body, a warm bed to sleep in, a warm husband to cuddle up with.

(That's not fair, Jun-chan. You think so too don't you Jun-chan.....?)

Nao gazed at the separated building.

(You would think it's unfair, you would feel sorry for me, wouldn't you?)

sinnesspiel

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Cultural Notes
10 - 2

Kagura – Shinto dances meant to please the Gods. The tale of the original Kagura is that the sun goddess Amaterasu (of whom the Japanese emperors are believed to be descendants) had become upset after her brother had damaged her property and killed one of her maids and hid away inside of a cave to prevent become further impure, thus casting the world into darkness. The goddess of dawn and revelry, Ame no Uzume, stripped down and performed a lively dance atop a bucket while other on looking gods and goddesses laughed, or in some iterations played music in cooperation with her. Amaterasu was drawn out to see what the fuss was over. A mirror was placed outside of the cave and she was drawn out by her bright reflection. The cave was quickly closed and sealed behind her, and she was asked and agreed to serve as the sun goddess again.

There are many regional festivals set around Kagura dances and many more dances for each day or night of each festival. While there are Imperial Kagura performed at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, there are many village Kagura performed based on regional customs or gods. Shinto Shrines have a Kagura hall specifically for these performance ceremonies. In general, Kagura call to the gods, welcome them to where they are being summoned with entertainment, then see them off. These three stages could be seen

to reflect the pacing of Noh performances as well. Evil spirits being taken away or vanquished by the visiting gods is also a common theme of the last stage. The four main categories of village Kagura are:

Miko Kagura, where one or more shrine maidens called Miko dance with bells and other decorations and are said to be possessed by the gods who care called down. The dances performed by Miko at the Imperial Kagura are said to be done by descendants of Ame no Uzume who had done the first Kagura dance to lure out Amaterasu.
Izumo-style Kagura where performers with Noh masks act out the myths of the gods and Noh inspired songs and dances.

Ise-style Kagura centering around a pot of hot water used to purify objects or even observers.

Lion Kagura where performers dress up as a long, serpentine bodied lion with a puppeteer-manned head.

Torimono performances – Kagura dances with props. Torimono literally translates into "something in hand." In some cases the god is believed to be within the divine item, at other times it's believed to summon a divine power. They can also be ceremonial dances to bless or purify the objects in question. It varies greatly based on the region and festival. The props can be anything from sacred leaves, rods and bows as mentioned to vines, grass, swords, bells, head dresses and branches. One object mentioned in Shiki is the sacred cedar bow.

Cedar – The Japanese cedar, sakaki, are used in Shinto rituals and are a common sacred offering. Ever green and always thriving, it's also thought of as a "border tree" (Sakae meaning border, ki meaning tree) to set off an area as a sacred space. There are legends of cedar trees and branches being used and decorated for events such as the first Kagura that drew out Amaterasu. The most common decorations are mirrors, swords and jewels, which are known as the three sacred treasures of Japan.

Month of the Frost Kagura – One type of Ise-style Kagura, named and set based on the eleventh month of the Lunar calendar,

known as the month of the frost. Many areas Month of the Frost Kagura also include Miko dances around and interacting with the cauldron of water offered for purification. They're usually harvest festivals but may also be used to pray for good hunts, and are close to the winter solstice. For convenience they're often held on the weekends in November or December.

Noh – Ancient Japanese musical theatre, focusing heavily on dance and precise movements that (ideally) have not changed over the decades. The dances-as-plays are performed based on following precise movements rather than individualistic expression as is common in other, especially more modern types of theater. Many Noh plays don't have the traditional story arcs with a climax and denouement either, though there is a required pacing taken from Kagura festivals that predate them. Just as Kagura have the welcoming, the entertaining, and the lively, if perhaps violent seeming send off, Noh have a slow beginning, rising action, then quickening with a swift end.

Traditionally performed by all male troops, characters sex, age, and even emotions are expressed with wooden masks whose expressions can change based on the shadows and angle. Example image of a mask displaying many angles and emotions from Wikimedia commons (Public Domain).

Most of the stories involve divine elements such as Oni or gods, and many of the masks may hold a distinctive role just as certain character names represent a certain character type even if it isn't necessarily the same character in any canonical continuity, just as the aforementioned Hachigoro character in Rakugo.

Noh plays are divided into five categories:

God plays in which a god disguises themselves as human and reveals themselves to a human, usually a monk, during the course of the play (See: Takasago).

Warrior plays in which ghosts of ancient warriors find a monk to send them to salvation and purify them, often with a reenactment of their final battle to purge their lingering regret. (See: Sanemori)

Wig/Woman plays in which the main character is a female role, which may still be a disguised god or oni character as in god and oni plays, still played by a male actor usually emphasizing the grace of the dance and costume (See: Miwa; below, which has elements of the above two types as well).
Oni plays in which the main role is a monster or an Oni, usually with lively, violent dancing.

The Three Rituals - Noh plays aren't usually prefaced by **The Three Rituals** outside of specific special occasions such as New Years Day or such festivals, as they're considered more of a spiritual rite than a performance. In some practices, the three actors must undergo purification rituals or abstain from certain things for a period before the dances. Even less of a story than Noh, they're dances of abstract ideas from when the dance arts that would go on to become Noh were being formed. The three dances, or perhaps more accurately rites, are performed in the role of the venerable old man or the white haired old man who performs for peace, the black haired old man who performs a fertility rite and for a good harvest, and the fatherly old man who performs for longevity. They perform in both thanks for and in petitioning the things which they represent. The three have also been said to represent the three rules of Buddhism (the law, retribution, and obedience); the gods of rice, renewal and ancestry; the three religions (Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism); or other sets of three.

Miwa – Literally "Three Wheels," A Noh play named after the setting. The Noh play tells the story of a woman who makes daily offerings to the temple atop a mountain above the village of Niwa. She asked the monk to loan her his kimono as it became colder. She invites him to come down to see her at the base of the mountain before fading into a mist. A villager saw the kimono hanging on the branch of a cedar tree in the village of Miwa and recognized it as the monk's; he asked the monk about it and when the monk told him about what happened, they determined that he met somebody who wasn't human. The man set out to the sacred tree where he found his kimono with a poem written in gold about the "Three Wheels" of Buddha. The Three Wheels of Buddha is the belief that all three parts in an exchange should be pure; the one giving, the one receiving, and the thing being given must be pure.

The woman, the Deity of Miwa, also known as the Deity of the Ise shrine, then appears and asks the monk to purify her. She says deities can be temporarily tainted by the human world and tells the story of a man who only visits his female lover at night. The woman asks why she can't be with him during the day and he says that his appearance would shame them both, and that that night will be their last night together. The woman sewed a thread into his kimono and left it on the spool so that she could follow him when he left. She came to the cedar tree at the base of mount Miwa and found out he was actually a tree. Because she had three spools or wheels of thread, the sacred cedar became known as the Seal of Miwa (three wheels/spools).

The monk was saddened by this story, so the Deity of Miwa then told him the story of when the sun goddess Amaterasu had gone into hiding in the cave and was lured out by the first Kagura. The Deity of Miwa danced the lively Kagura dance and said that her emergence was the beginning of everything. Then the sun rose, just as the darkness faded with Amaterasu's coming out, and the monk mourned that the dream he was experiencing would end as all things, even the stars, must.

The Twelve Divine Arts to the Five Gods, The Thirteen Acts to the Five Gods

– The twelve, then amended to thirteen counting The Three Rituals as a single addition, is explained in the text. Inari were briefly described when Kyousuke visited the shrine, and explained in the chapter notes for Book 1, Chapter 2, Part 3. While there are many different legends and folk beliefs about Inari, the one relevant here is the belief or expression of them as five Inari gods. In the past it had been three Inari gods, though which they're believed to be varies. Of course there are also far more than five Inari gods and temples to countless numbers of them. Which gods are Inari or are served by Inari vary by legend. The most common five Inari gods (those who are enshrined at the Fushimi Inari Shrine) are:

Uka no Mitama – the spirit of rice and harvests; said to be connected to the root of life itself. Said to have given man the five grains (rice, wheat, proso millet, foxtail millet, beans), fish,

livestock, and other necessary basic foodstuffs.

Sarutahiko – the god of roadways and guidance, famously portrayed as a giant with a very long nose. He is the ancestor of all earthly gods (as opposed to heavenly gods) who guides man into balance with nature. Husband of Ame no Uzume.

Ame no Uzume – Also known as Ohmiyame the goddess of dawn and revelry whose dancing was the first Kagura drawing Amaterasu from the cave. Sarutahiko as the guardian of the boundary between the heavens and earth had refused to allow the god Ninigi sent by Amaterasu to rule over the earth to pass. Ame no Uzume performed another revealing dance to entice him to allow Ninigi to pass.

Tanaka – a god of abundant harvest, said to be a local god, perhaps merely a local term for Inari perhaps based on Oonamuchi, a god of new ventures and successful business.

Shi – Literally 4, the origins of this enshrined Inari are, like Tanaka, various and lost to time. In some telling it said to be the reigning goddess of or alternately the amalgamation of the Shinto goddess Ukemochi, Wakumusubi, and Toyouke (three goddesses of different Japanese genesis legends attributing the creation or distribution of food to the goddess of the story), and the Hindu/ Buddhist goddess Dakinishinten who, when being transferred to Japan was often depicted with a white fox and thus associated with Inari.

Alternately, or perhaps concurrently given Japan's history of blending faiths, the development from three Inari gods to five may be seen as a reflection of five major Buddhist deities.

In this view the central figure Uka no Mitama would be a reflection of the Gautama Buddha.

Sarutahiko would be the primary Buddha of Pure Land Buddhism Amitabha.

Ame no Uzume would be the medicine Buddha Bhaisajyaguru.

Tanaka would be Acala, known as Fudo Myou (Immovable One)

in Japan and a key figure in Japanese Shingon Buddhism.

Shi would be either be the group of Four Heavenly Kings in Buddhism or specifically their chief Bishamonten.

10 - 3

Seal

- Rather than signatures, most Japanese mark any official document with a stamp-seal. If you don't have a stamp, particularly if you're foreign, they will generally let you sign, but the 'signature' space is usually a very small square due to the stamp being the customary 'signature' on most things.

10 -4
Snapping turtle door (*suppon*

) - A rising and falling trap door on a stage. It's called a snapping turtle door because the actor's head rises up from the ground like a turtle's head protruding from a shell.

10 - 7
The crest on the lantern was drawn with white contours, unfilled on black, meaning it was a mourning lamp

. - Fortunately the translation included the explanation there natively in the text identifying a shadow crest as a mourning crest. In general, family crests are either dyed entirely in white, with spaces filled in (

a sunny crest

), they are outlined in white and not filled in (

a shadow crest

), or are outlined in white with some portions filled in in white (

an in-between crest

). They are generally on a black background. While sunny crests are the most formal, depending on the family and crest certain ones are used for certain occasions. In this case the Yasumori shadow crest is used for mourning.

sinnesspiel

1

On the morning of the 18th Maeda Motoko found that her husband was dead.

Motoko sat in a daze. For a period of time, she couldn't even think to call to anybody. When at last she finally realized she had to let someone know, the face that came to mind was that of her childhood friend's. Feeling like she were only half awake, Motoko telephoned Kanami.

Yano Kanami, awoken by the ringing of the phone, endured her headache as she brought the receiver to her ear. Last night was Saturday and she'd drank too much with the customers who had come to the Drive-In to drink. An unpleasant feeling lingered at the bottom of her stomach. The one calling had been Motoko.

"Kanami? Uhm, somethings wrong with my husband." Motoko's voice was lethargic, strangely lacking in something.

"Wrong with him?" she asked with a yawn, only to receive the terrifying reply.

"It's like he's dead?"

"What----did you say?"

"It's like he is dead."

Motoko's voice had no tension or strain.

"Hold up, Motoko, if that's a joke, that's enough already."

"I don't think that it is a joke, though?"

Hearing those words in that tone, Kanami's sleepiness was blown

away. Motoko was in a dangerous state. If Maeda Isami were really dead, this was not a normal way to behave, she thought.

"Motoko, sorry but pass the phone to someone else."

"Everyone's asleep. .....I wonder if perhaps my mother-in-Law is awake? Not yet, probably, right? It is a little early to be up after all."

"You haven't told anyone yet?"

That's right, said Motoko's voice, in a tone is if idly gossiping. None the less, her voice was despondent and empty. It had the calm of shallow water. Like any minute it would burst into a violent rushing stream.

"All right. I'll be coming right over. So open up the entryway. Can you do that?"

"Thank you," Motoko said with an empty laugh. "You saved me, I just didn't know what to do."

Suddenly Motoko's voice cut off. On the other end of the phone, Kanami could feel something grating.

"Motoko! It's fine. Don't think right now. I'll be right there. Okay?"

Yeah, Motoko's voice sounded like a child's. Kanami hung up the receiver and immediately phoned the hospital. Holding onto the phone as she changed clothes, she conveyed the situation to Toshio.

"Whaaat? What's all the ruckus?"

Her mother Tae had woken up.

"You woke up just in time. I'm sorry, but could you contact the Kami-Sotoba Caretaker? It looks like Motoko's husband's died."

Dear me, Tae said, otherwise lost for words.

"If you could call thme for me. I'm going to Motoko's place."

Without waiting for Tae's answer, Kanami hurried out. She'd barely washed her face before hurying out, hurrying down the roadway coated in morning mist. Hurrying to Motoko's house, when she had arrived, Motoko was crouched before the entryway with her face burried in her knees.

"Motoko!"

Motoko lifted her tear smeared face. "Kanami, my family is,"

"It's all right. I know. It was hard, wasn't it?"

"What should I do? I---What do I do?"

Motoko clung to Kanami's clothing sobbing as Kanami patted her back.

"It's all right. The Junior Doctor from the Ozakis is on his way now. And your Mother-in-law?"

Motoko shook her head. She wasn't awake yet, she probably wanted to say, or maybe she had wanted to say she hadn't told her yet.

"We'll have to wake her and tell her. It's all right, I'll do it." As she started to enter into the house, Motoko seized her.

"Kanami, what do I do? Isami-san, he's dead now you know. I'm an other now. If I have to go back home, I'd rather die."

Kanami's brows furrowed. "......Motoko?"

"They're my children. And yet Isami-san died now. What do I do? I...."

"Motoko," Kanami shook Motoko's shoulder. "Hang in there. It's all right, you don't need to worry. So calm down."

But, Motoko started to say when Kanami forcefully spoke over her. "Now pull it together. Where are Shigeki-kun and Shiori-chan? Calm your crying and go to see them. All right?"

At hearing her children's names, Motoko precisely stopped crying. Giving a nod when at last Motoko seemed to come back to herself, Kanami murmured.

"You've been rustling around, so I'm sure they're awake too. They must be hurting, I'm sure. You'll have to be there for them."

Motoko nodded. At last her expression returned firmly. Kanami internally sighed. When it came to supporting her children, she could pull herself together. That was all she could think of for now.

"Now, go on."

Urged by Kanami, Motoko hurried back into the house. At last taking a sigh of relief, Kanami tilted her head. Motoko was scattered. She had completely lost sense of what she was saying. --- But, when Motoko had spilled out those words, what had she been trying to convey?

As Kanami was tilting her head in puzzlement as she came into the home, the mother-in-law Tomiko had just woken up.

"What's this ruckus?"

"I'm sorry for the early hour. Motoko had called me."

"You---Kanami-san, she called you?"

"Saying something was wrong with Isami-san. Motoko was completely out of it."

My, Tomiko said, her expression changing as she was at a loss for words. She went further into the house down the hallway as if she were flowing water. Hurrying into a specific room, she took to her knees beside the spread out futon, then gave a full body gasp. "--- Isami!"

Kanami quietly peered at Isami's face over Tomiko's shoulder. His faintly open eyes, his faintly open mouth, he was utterly like a shell of a body that had cast off all signs of life. He didn't blink, nor was there any sign of his breathing. Isami is indeed dead, she thought.

"Why did Motoko-san call you about this!" Tomiko turned abruptly to face her. "Why, without a word to me, did she go to some complete stranger."

"Motoko was very distraught. She didn't know what to do."

"Then she could have called for me! He's my son!"

That's true, Kanami said, for the time being wanting to pacify Tomiko. The Junior Doctor is already on his way, so calm down for now, she had said to try to soothe her. Rather than wailing in grief over the loss of her son, Tomiko's face was flush with anger at not being told until now. Even now she seemed to hurry to the second story to condemn Motoko, and desperate to stop that, she had felt saved by the sound of Toshio's voice from the entryway.

Leaving Isami and Tomiko to Toshio, Kanami headed upstairs. Peeking into the children's room, Motoko was sitting at the children's bedside. The two children were fast asleep.

"The Junior Doctor's come."

When Kanami spoke to her, Motoko turned and nodded. Fixing up Shiori's futon, she stepped out of the children's room.

"Have you calmed down a little?"

Motoko nodded and wiped her tears. "I'm sorry. I was so completely lost....."

"It's understandable."

Motoko breathed a deep sigh. "What am I going to tell the two of them, I wonder?"

"That's right....."

"Is my mother-in-law awake, I wonder?"

Yeah, Kanami said with a nod, sitting on the first step of the stairway.

"I told her about it. It looks like your mother-in-law is completely at a loss too. She might say something to you later, but don't let it get to you. You were distressed too, and your mother-in-law was too. With it being what it is, it couldn't be simple and calm. So try to manage it."

"That's right....."

Motoko sighed and sat down next to her.

"Was Isami-san sick?"

"He was. But the family, including my mother-in-law, they hate the hospital so..... We had the Junior Doctor come but it ended without him going off to the hospital."

"I see....."

Again, Kanami thought. It was essentially the same situation as with her father-in-law Iwao.

"Say, Kanami. Do you know the strange rumor going around?"

"Hm?"

Motoko's face was serious, her voice low. "They say there's an epidemic."

"Ah.... That. That's right, there are people saying that too, aren't there?"

"I wonder if it's true? It can't be.... right? My family, they won't catch it from my father-in-law...."

"Motoko."

"If it is, then maybe even the children will...."

"Motoko, it's all right." Kanami gripped Motoko's hand. "You have to believe it will be all right. .....The truth is even I can't say for sure. It's true there is a rumor, and it's true that enough people have

died that it would be strange not to think that it's an epidemic. But if it were an epidemic, you can take means to avoid it. So just be sure to be careful. Do that, and believe that it will be all right if you're careful."

"But, that's....."

"There's no other way, is there? If you get worried and become disoriented, it'll be Shigeki-kun and Shiori-chan who get hurt. So believe it. Do everything you can to keep it together, you have to make the children believe it's really all right too."

That's right, Motoko said lowering her eyes. For a bit, she was caught up in her thoughts as Kanami held her hand, when at last she rose her face.

"Say..... These strange things happening in the village started since Kanemasa had moved in, didn't they?"

"That's not true," Kanami said forcefully. "Kanemasa moved in after the people in Yamairi had died. After Gotouda's Shuuji-san had died. So it doesn't have anything to do with the otusiders."

"But I heard that the people of Kanemasa aren't well either. They have some kind of chronic illness, they said."

"That's unrelated too. Their illness isn't contagious. It's the opposite, it's more easy for them to catch something from others."

"But."

"The immune system, it's called, I think? It's an abnormality to do with that, I heard. So they catch diseases from other people easily, and when they do it's a big deal. In fact the master of Kanemasa is incredibly worried because it does look like an epidemic is spreading. He even said that they might be the ones to catch something from us. So it's the other way around. It's not like what you're thinking."

".....Is that right?"

Kanami nodded. She'd heard a summary of it from customers who came into the shop. Those were the details of when Itou Ikumi from Mizuguchi stormed on Kanemasa.

"My....."

"The master was flaring mad, I heard. When Ikumi-san said for him to bring out his wife and daughter, he said he wasn't going to have them meet with the people of the village. If they caught something, it'd be a grave matter after all."

"I see....."

Motoko sighed. At last, maybe from her whole body being in a flutter, she felt like she had calmed down. Full of gratitude, Motoko gripped at Kanami's hand. Kanami gave a smile and patted Motoko's hand as she stood. She went down the stairs.

Motoko saw her off, then sat. Her husband was dead, and the reality of that bubbled up as an undeniable truth in her chest. Motoko had been left behind. That was why she had pushed him all that much to please go to the hospital.

"....Oni."

Iwao died, Isami died. It really was like Iwao drew Isami along with him. The continuing deaths in the village. Just like in the legends, something was spreading death about.

(.....That can't be, can it?)

Oni and the like couldn't exist, not really.

(But.....)

Motoko briefly gazed out into space. Something was running rampart in the village. It was mercilessly drawing the villagers in. Into the forest of furs, from the graveyard. It infiltrated the village---and someday, it might even snatch Motoko's children from her.

sinnesspiel

2

"Another one's passed away?" Kiyomi stopped pouring coffee to make a sullen face. Ritsuko nodded. "And? Who?"

"A person called Maeda Isami. It seems he was from Shimo-Sotoba, but."

"I don't know him. But when was it, another person called Maeda had died sometime here too. One the doctor was caring for. I wonder if it's a relative?"

"I wonder? ……It must be hard for the doctor too. Even without that, his wife is in bad condition already."

"That's right. To tell the truth, this isn't the time to be making house calls for other people though if you ask me. And the Junior Missus, how is she?"

"No change it looks like. Doesn't it seem like it's being drug out somehow this time? His face is looking so much more troubled."

Kiyomi sighed. "Well after all, he didn't know about it until she'd already collapsed. In terms of the disease we think it is, she's holding out well. Now I don't know if the doctor's will is going to hold out that long, though."

"That is true."

Isaki Satoko entered as Ritsuko nodded.

"Oh my, good morning."

Replying with a polite "Good morning" to Kiyomi's greeting, Satoko looked into the breakroom. "Uhm…… Has Yuki-chan come?"

"No. What's the matter?"

"Yuki-chan, she was off yesterday, wasn't she?"

Yeah, Ritsuko nodded. For the time being, Ritsuko and the others took turns having one day off every two weeks. Yesterday had been Yuki's day off.

"She said she was going to head home since it had been a while, and so she went out the night before last. Last night, she still hadn't come back. So I thought that she might have come to work directly from home, but?"

Ritsuko looked between the two of their faces.

"She still hasn't come. And she hasn't called either. But if she didn't come back last night, she must plan to come from home, right?"

"That's what I assume, but....."

With the way Satoko showed her unease, Ritsuko couldn't help but feeling a vague, hard to pin sense of worry herself. The time for the meeting game. Yuki didn't show up after all. "I wonder if she went home and found herself nostalgic?" Kiyomi laughed, but that smile was, as expected, a bit forced. As the time came for office hours to open, even still there was no sign of Yuki. Satoko wasn't able to bare it and called Yuki's house.

The one who picked up when Satoko called was Yuki's mother. When Satoko asked where Yuki was, her mother was the one to sound surprised.

"Uhm..... Yuki has gone back there, but?"

"No! She hasn't come back. And she hasn't come in to the hospital yet either."

"Impossible. I mean, she left last night---let's see, just past ten was it, I wonder? She said she had work tomorrow and so that she was going back when she left."

Satoko could feel her blood run cold. Yuki's house was near enough that she could commute to Sotoba. And so her not having arrived yet was impossible. Something had to have happened, without a doubt.

"Did something happen to Yuki-chan?" Ritsuko asked uneasily as Satoko hung up the phone. Satoko shook her head. But even she knew that she was trembling.

"Last night, she left her house. Something's happened. What should we do, Ritsuko-can?"

The blood drained from Ritsuko's face. Hearing the conversation, Kiyomi and the others nearby stiffened their faces.

"You don't think an accident.....?"

"I don't know. Anyway, her parents will try to find out what happened. Then if they don't find her, it seems they'll call the police."

"My....." Ritsuko lightly gripped her own arms with both hands. She felt very cold and forlorn. She couldn't help being terrified by her unease.

While that was happening, at last Toshio came down from the second story. It was already ten minutes past opening hours.

"Ah, Doctor!" Satoko braced herself and hurried to Toshio. She conveyed the situation to Toshio.

"What should we do, Doctor? If something's happened to Yuki-chan....."

"Yeah," Toshio said, but it was completely absent-minded. Satoko was let down. Passing by Satoko who was now at a loss for words, Toshio went into the examination room."

"That's..... Doctor, that's too cold." There was a light pat on her shoulder. It was Yasuyo.

"Well, the Doctor is only human. And his wife is in that condition,

it wouldn't be a stretch to say she's on the verge of death, even....."

"But what about Yuki-chan, hasn't she been working here all this time? And when she's the one to go missing, he just says 'Oh'! Is that any way to respond to that?"

"He has his plate full with his wife. And to start with, I'm sure he's worn out too. I know why you're upset, Satoko-chan, but we need to be a understanding."

"......That's true but."

Satoko didn't seem satisfied with that, and even Yasuyo who had said it to comfort her didn't believe what she said. "Cold," at Satoko said was not an unfitting word. No matter how far past the brink of exhaustion he was, you couldn't respond like that to one of your own staff going missing.

"He's worn out, I think," Ritsuko was the one to say. "I think that the doctor is already at his edge too."

"Yes..... He must be, yes." Satoko lowly replied. Of all of the nurses not a one of them could find any other words to add to the matter.

sinnesspiel

3

Notification of Maeda Isami's death reached his workplace, the JA.

Hearing it, Shimizu's breath held as he thought: "Again." To tell the truth, lately Shimizu had felt himself in the suspicious clutches of something. It was a sensation that was started by small affairs, piled upon by the vague suspicion that something was strange, a mounting sense of malaise.

For example, Shimizu thought as his fingers stopped tapping at the calculator as he surveyed his workplace that night. The Sotoba Japanese Agricultural Cooperative. At a glance it was no different from a small bank or credit union branch building. Despite employees still lingering about as it went on nine o'clock, one couldn't escape the impression of things being quite laid back.

The village had no bank or credit union. All there were were this JA building and the special post office. Most household kept their savings at the post office, and those who were farmers for the most part had accounts with the JA. Farmers or foresters had to have an account with the JA. And yet at the same time, it was more convenient to use the post office for practical reasons. So it had been only natural for households to have two accounts and to split savings between them but lately he had the feeling that that practice was in decline.

Some were in the habit of taking any business deposit that came in to their JA account, immediately transferring it to their postal account, then transferring what was needed back into the JA account to finance the mutual aid society loans and such. But even so on that particular month the money was delayed, the amounts having to be pulled from the accounts by debit. They were small

amounts in total, but it was clear the frequency of such cases were increasing. There was no shortage of accounts that had frozen completely, whose payments had stopped coming in altogether, either. Especially amongst those not in the agricultural cooperative who just had accounts with them; there were many who were only investing members whose accounts had frozen. ---This was in itself not a terribly big deal. It wasn't enough to hamper their credit operations.

Maybe these things just happened. The JA was a credit union but the mutual aid society had a service window in the same building. The Mutual Aid society staff members frequently sold insurance to union members and non-union members alike, and in some cases collected installments. Even so, since this past summer the number of people moving out had increased. Even as they went out to the homes, there was nobody there, and payments went unpaid. There was no contact before or after. The three door to door solicitors had given up. ---And even this was, in itself, perhaps not such a big deal.

There were fewer staff members. This again was not severe enough to necessarily merit any special mention. The Chief had quit. There were other employees too who had resigned. There was one employee who, without resignation, had simply stopped coming. They had filed in with new staff but operating now with about half of their staff being new to the job, the office's work was many times over less efficient. Thanks to that, Shimizu was stuck doing overtime until the late hours like this.

It wasn't just that there was much work to be done, there were many discrepancies and inconsistencies that had to be smoothed over or required paperwork regarding them. Sotoba's JA didn't wish for these small discrepancies to leak to the outside. If these details got out, then the main office beyond Sotoba would noisily intervene. Originally this overtime work was to avoid making that necessary, after all all of the discrepencies were quite small matters, and everyone was eager to handle it internally.

And there was death. --Since that summer, the deaths continued throughout the village. Shimizu's daughter had died in the middle of August. And since then there had been an abundance of rumors of this or that person dying. Were this many people really dying,

Shimizu expressed skeptically, but his coworkers just smiled sympathetically and spoke of the lingering summer heat, leaving it at that. All of Shimizu's coworkers were nervous on the matter, he thought, perhaps because his daughter had died. Once it became undeniably and fully and properly Fall, his coworkers smiled faded.

Not only did their smiles change, their entire demeanor did.

He had a persecution complex, Shimizu himself thought. All the same, Shimizu did have the feeling that he really was being isolated. As September started, they begun remodeling. It was only a matter of rearranging their desks but as they did, Shimizu's desk was relocated to the corner by the wall. He had decreased direct contact with his coworkers. The female clerk who brought tea kept Shimizu's teacup alone separate from everyone else's. Even when he used the disinfectant in the tea kettle room and the restroom, people hesitated to accept things he handed them.

It was around that time, he thought. The time when the word "epidemic" started to be heard back and forth between those in the office. Lately, the modifier "a new strain" had been affixed to that rumor. And each time somebody gave word to it, everyone averted their gazes from Shimizu at once, closing their mouths.

He was being avoided, Shimizu felt. He lost his daughter. So Shimizu was unclean. He could feel with certainty that that was what they were thinking.

Minute uneases piled up, indeed small unpleasantries, oddities, incidents leaving a bizarre impression. As those piled up, they formed an unseen wall between Shimizu and those in the society around him. Betrayed by the outside world, alienated, rejected. He couldn't place his faith in anything. Deprived of the relief that came with a sense of belonging, Shimizu had nowhere to turn to.

(But.....Why?)

Shimizu had only lost his daughter. With his daughter, merely a tenth grader, had been swept away, a hole was left in his home. Shimizu thought of himself as a victim. He was the one hit by calamity and disaster. None the less, everyone around him was

treating Shimizu like a perpetrator. Why, on top of losing his daughter, did he have to be treated like this as well?

Since this summer, something was out of line. Shimizu couldn't avoid thinking that. Something was strange in this village. There were those who said it was an epidemic but Shimizu didn't believe that. If his daughter died of an epidemic, why was Shimizu still fine? And his wife and father. They had nothing wrong with them. Even the doctor didn't say anything.

At the same time, he knew that the situation was one that could only be explained by an epidemic. Indeed the deaths were continuing. Having actually lost his daughter to it, Shimizu's sense of crisis was much deeper than that of those around him. The string of sudden deaths was something he could see spreading faster. If this went on, wouldn't the village itself die out entirely?

Since that summer the village was strange.

(Kanemasa……)

Yes, since they had moved into that mansion. They moved in in the middle of the night, into that strange house, and before Megumi's death she had climed up that hill towards Kanemasa.

Shimizu accepted that his suspicion was irrational. None the less, day by day that conviction grew until it became a firm belief.

The agony that befell him, all of it was caused by Kanemasa. He couldn't shake off the feeling that his pain had been entirely caused by those who had transferred into town.

sinnesspiel

4

All who attended Tanaka Yoshikazu's funeral, to a man, had said "This is a strange funeral," or were at least wearing expresses that meant they didn't need to say it aloud. Sachiko seated in the chief mourner's seat couldn't bear those gazes. The children were still treating her with the same attitude as before, and that again was unbearable.

As Hayami had said, the nail was driven into the coffin which was then lowered, and then it was carried out through another door. If such a theatric display was unpleasant, walking down the road after the sun had set, going in the darkness to a rarely visited grave site was all the moreso.

Free from the questioning gazes of the funeral attendants once at home, Sachiko let out a sigh. That was terrible, she realized. But this was only the beginning of it, it was not over. Now Sachiko would have to go on living with the two children---two rebellious children. Sachiko's blood relatives had been in the village but they weren't any longer. Her aging mother had been called on by her brother and his wife frequently for money. They couldn't depend on distant relatives for money, and when she thought of how quickly her brother and his wife left them afterwards saying something about work, it was clear that she couldn't depend on them either. Only her mother seemed to be worried for Sachiko, but she had been taken off by her brother. So likely her mother would not be able to save her either. She was living on a pension out of which she was giving an allowance to her older brother and his wife, so there was no money to speak of for help. Her isolation sunk into her chest. Sachiko couldn't avoid thinking that she'd been betrayed by her husband.

Kaori watched as her mother went to bed with a stormy disposition.

(Dad had always been saying that he didn't feel good.)

She felt it pathetic that her father had never received any compassion to the end. While she couldn't help thinking that her father had been treated unreasonably, to tell the truth that might have been because of a single suspicion she had regarding her father's death.

(.....Megumi's voice.)

Without a doubt, it had been Megumi's voice. Megumi pronounced her father's death. When she went to check on that, her father really was----.

Kaori sat in the living room, her body shivering. She was afraid to return to her room. Last night she had stayed with her family at the funeral parlor so she had been able to forget her fear. But tonight she was alone.

(I'll stay in Akira's room.)

Thinking that, when she went to his room, Akira was spaced out atop his futon.

"Nee, Akira, can I sleep with you tonight?"

When asked he nodded. And so Kaori laid out her own bedding beside Akira's guton. It was after she prepared for bed and climbed in that Akira at last opened his mouth.

"Naa, Kaori. What'll we do?"

"Do? About what?"

"About them."

Kaori shivered. "There's nothing to do is there? There's nothing that we can do about it. We don't have Yuuki-san anymore, and....."

"But Megumi killed Dad!"

"Stop it!" Kaori sat up from her futon. "Don't put it like that!"

"Its the truth. Megumi did it. I'm sure it's 'cause we've noticed too much. Nii-chan got attacked the same way that Dad did. You wanna just leave this alone?"

"There's no other choice is there? We shouldn't have gotten involved. It's because we butted in that Yuuki-san and Dad....." Kaori's words stopped up. The words "are dead" or "were killed," or the like were ones she didn't even want to say aloud.

"We're still just kids. We can't do anything, so we can't!"

Akira glared at Kaori. "But none of the adults even know, do they? If we don't do something, nothing's going to happen."

"But still!"

"Nii-chan was killed, dad was killed, and you're saying we should just let it keep going on?" What had come over Akira was anger. Nobody understood how weighty the matter was. The adults wouldn't grasp the severity of things. "If we don't do something, people are just going to keep being attacked."

"Then you can go to Yuuki-san's grave by yourself! You be the one to drive a stake into him!" Kaori shouted, burying herself in her futon.

Akira stiffened. "There's..." No way I could to that, Akira swallowed down those words. Right, even Natsuno might have risen up. And then he would go on attacking victims.

(There's no way.)

Akira thought that reflexively, but saying that Natsuno couldn't rise, or saying that Natsuno couldn't attack people would be clearly meaningless. If it was Natsuno, Akira had the feeling he would say that he'd told him to do what had to be done. It wasn't as if Akira knew Natsuno that well but he had the feeling Natsuno knew what was important. He knew what mattered most of all, would take

action without being seized by fear. He wasn't like Akira who drew back at the last minute in fear.

---Yeah, Natsuno had driven the stake into Motohashi Tsuruko. He said they had to put a stop to this. If Natsuno were here, he'd probably say he had to be staked too. No, or was it too late for that? Natsuno was buried on Sunday. Two days had already passed.

(Nii-chan was thinking he wanted me to do that for him.....)

If it was Natsuno, he wouldn't have wanted to rise up. He wouldn't want to become a monster like Megumi, to attack victims.

In order to save him from that, there was no choice but to dig up Natsuno's grave. Dig it up, pull out the coffin, drive in the stake.

In Akira's mind, the memories of when they dug up Megumi--and Motohashi Tsuruko's graves were revived in his mind. Could he do that much manual labor alone? It'd probably be all he could do to run out to the grave and back. Natsuno wasn't there to do it with him anymore.

(And what if while I'm doing it another weird guy shows up.....?)

When they dug up Motohashi Tsuruko's grave, Akira hadn't been able to move. Even when he thought Kaori was in danger.

And even if nobody did show up. Even if he did somehow muster the courage to dig up the grave, even if he could open the coffin, no matter how he thought about it he didn't think he'd be able to drive a stake into Natsuno--into someone he knew.

Akira saw Natsuno as many times over braver than Akira himself was. He could drive a stake into others, likely even into people he knew. Doing that would hurt the other person. He couldn't do that to Natsuno. ---Much less to his own father.

Yes, just as it was possible for Natsuno to rise up, of course it was possible for his father to rise up too. The same father who that very night was buried in the darkness. If he went now he'd make it on time. Even if Natsuno had already risen up, his father hadn't.

Akira drew his body into itself.

He couldn't do something like that.

(But if I can't do that, then what are we supposed to do?)

sinnesspiel

5

Mitsuo was cleaning the tatami room when he heard a short buzzer. Realizing it was the sound of Shinmei calling for somebody, he hastened to the other building.

"Head Monk, what is the matter?"

The chief monk in the sickbed nodded to Mitsuo and motioned to the shelf at his bedside. There sat a single white envelope.

"Could you, send that, for me?"

Mitsuo nodded to the words spoke haltingly to him. He picked up the envelope with its distinctly applied seal. There was no address. He could write a letter using the word processor but it was beyond him to be able to address an envelope.

"And who shall I have this sent out to?" When asked, Shinmei replied Kanemasa. "Ah, yes, yes."

Mitsuo nodded in understanding but Shinmei waved his hand as if to say he was wrong. "To the, Kanemasa, mansion, that is."

"What was that? The ones who moved in?" Mitsuo blinked. Did he mean to say that this was for those who had moved onto the Kanemasa land? "To Kirishiki-san? Not the Kanemasa in Mzobe?"

Shinmei nodded. Mitsuo opened his mouth to ask "Why?" but Shinmei didn't answer.

"Please, Mitsuo-kun."

Right, Mitsuo murmured. He tilted his head in bewilderment

several times as he returned to the temple office where he wrote out the address. The mater was Kirishiki Seishirou, did they say? At any rate, he went to the post box, and when he returned, Seishin had returned from the service.

"Ah, welcome back. Say, Junior Monk?" Mitsuo relayed the situation with the envelope to Seishin. "I wonder what kind of business he has with him?"

Seishin tilted his head. Kanemasa was one thing, but Seishin couldn't think of any reason for Shinmei to write a letter to the Kirishiki household. Seishin tried to ask him about that at the next opportunity. Shinmei responded that it was "Just a greeting."

"A greeting---you say?"

Shinmei nodded. He wouldn't say more than that. Seishin didn't think it was a simple greeting. To start with there was no need to send such a thing, and he had the feeling Shinmei's condition was too severe for a mere greeting.

It can't be, Seishin thought as he returned to the temple office from the separate building. Was it possible that Shinmei had realized the situation? Come to think of it, when he had gone to see Yasumori Tokujiro for a sick visit, he seemed strangely as if he'd had something in mind. Yesterday, he had been strange when Tokujirou's death notice had been conveyed to him. He was more disinterested than necessary. It was possible that when Shinmei had gone to see him, that he had understood then and there at Tokujirou's life was over. Did he also realize that the Kirishiki family was behind everything? And, irritated that Seishin could not do a single thing, had he had a mind to take matters into his own hands?

(It can't be.....)

Seishin smiled wryly and shook his head. No matter what it was, there was no way that the bed-bound Shinmei could realize the truth of the bizarre situation. Thinking that he might just know and suspecting that he was taking action was without a doubt simply the affect of Seishin's own guilt with himself for not doing anything.

It was because he felt he was being blamed by someone. He had a guilty conscience because of that.

But he did imagine that his inconvenienced father taking the trouble to write a letter meant that it was no mere greeting. Even if he didn't know the truth of the matter, Shinmei must have had some purpose if he wanted to go through the trouble of writing the Kirishiki family.

Even his bedfast father had wanted to do something. And so he went through such pains to write a letter. None the less, Seishin had hidden holed up in the temple unsure of what to do with himself. While he coldn't forgive himself for being so feckless, he didn't know what to do. He wished the Shiki wouldn't be there but that wasn't the same as wishing to make it so that they weren't. Seishin turned, melancholy, towards the sanctuary. He knew that going in the middle of the day meant nobody would be there. Even if it were at night, Seishin supposed that nobody else would come to visit here anymore. Seishin sat dazed on the bench, then lied down.

The ceilings were high, groundlessly high. Even if he tried to imagine it, he couldn't think of a reason for the building to be shaped thusly.

(What am I, I wonder?)

And he who wandered the wilderness?

Was the hill paradise, or was it a penal colony? Was he a citizen of innocence or was he only more of a sinner? What was he thinking, when he killed his little brother?

He couldn't help but wonder what had come over him on that tragic day.
It was Autmnm the season of harvest, a beautiful and clear day, and at that time, the people of the hill were giving thanks for the year, taking up their offerings to the Lord in hand as they headed to the temple. He too was once mroe heading to the temple with his little brother.
The first born healthy and fat sheep, that was the usual

offering procured. That day he'd called out to his little brother, about to as for one to take up in offering, but after a bit, he thought and stopped.
The sheep were his little brother's work, they were not his. He plowed the lands, made his living scattering the seeds of the grains. The seeds took root, the grains were the blessings of the earth, and he was the one to gather them, a task he was able to perform by the grace of God.
Rather than receive a sheep from his little brother to offer up, as it was not something he had raised, he thought to bringing that which he had raised, rather than a sheep. He was living by the grace of God. And so all the more reason to offer unto God as thanks for that grace the very best fruits of that relation between he and God, he had decided.
He was blessed by God, with the food that he had raised through His providence. Grateful for that, he was determined to return those offerings unto God, and gathered up more of them than even a fat first born sheep of the year would weigh into a sack.
At first his little brother seemed to find it strange that he was bringing with him not a sheep but a sack of grains but as they spoke of it, his eyes narrowed as he nodded. With that he and his little brother set off to make their offerings.
But the sage of the temple scowled.
It was decided that offerings were to be the first born sheep. He had presented his reasonings and yet the wiseman did not understand. His little brother put in word for him.
His older brother was following his faith by offering to God his very best. Faith was a sacred contract between God and his brother and it should not cross with his relationship with the temple. By the measuring eye of the temple and its criterion, his older brother's preparations had more value than even a sheep.
The wiseman praised his little brother's reasoning, and he and his little brother entered into the temple with their offerings. At the altar at the summit of the tower they aligned their offerings.
And then his offering was refused. The sage had said that it was conveyed that God had not been pleased with his offering. The proof of a contract of faith with God was one head of

sheep, why had he been so frugal?
It wasn't as if he were frugal. Rather he had offered up more than he would have been offering with a sheep. He had argued but his meaning was not understood.
Hanging his head he left the temple.
Why did God refuse his sincerity and worship?
On the way he peered into a storefront when he saw a new hoe, but he had only longed for it because his hoe was damaged; at the very least when he had been at the point of purchase he hadn't been longing for it as a weapon.
He went down the street using the brand new hoe as a cane. As they went he was always quiet, thinking uneasily about his surroundings. Even God did not understand his heart. Then surely nobody else could understand him either. That was the extent to which those around him were not at accord with his words and deeds. He was alone in a way that would be difficult to save him from.
Melancholy he went through the forest, coming out at the field. As he looked upon the lush greenery he had loved eternally, a meaningless impulse seized him.
He had wanted to scream. ---What, he himself didn't know. With no words to shout out, he instead brandished the hoe. And then he swung it back downwards onto his little brother. His little brother turned around. Turned arond, standing, frozen, for a moment his eyes were wide staring at him. And then like that he fell unto the field. Shocked and frightened by his own action, he realized his sin in an instant, thought of the punishment that would come down upon him. Called a murderer, he would be driven from the land. Unable to return to this field, he had forever lost his pathway to belonging within the order. Without his little brother, he no longer had a place to belong.
As melancholy clouded his view he wailed. As he wailed he rushed over his little brother and brought it down a second, a third time. His little brother did not move at all.
He drew out the skewering hoe and threw it aside, kneeling beside his little brother's husk. He clung to his body as if to call back his little brother's life, he drew him close, but his brother had long since stopped breathing. He lamented, and while crying he hid that husk in the fields. Still covered in spurts of

blood he returned alone to the house.
Looking back---he had never accepted his little brother's death. That was why he hid him in the field. By separating himself from the corpse, he was trying to separate himself from his death. That night he was half serious in waiting on his brother's return, and the next day he even expressed worry to the neighbors that his little brother hadn't returned.
In truth the night passed with him waiting for his little brother to return. He waited for his living, warm brother to return through the door but of course his little brother did not return. He'd wished for his sin to vanish in such a way but of course his sin could not come to not be.
On the third day, the sage had heard the rumor and came to visit. He was even half serious in requesting his help in finding his little brother. The neighbors split out across the field per the wiseman's instruction, and then his little brother's body was found.

On the way back from the church, Seishin crossed through the graveyard when he noticed flowers placed before a fresh grave. That in itself wasn't unusual. In the village it was more common to hold services at mortuary tablets but it wasn't as if they never tended to graves at all. On Obon and the equinoctial week festivals graves were tended to, and sotoba planks were erected for memorial services. What drew his attention to it was that it wasn't the season for any of those, and that the flowers furnishing it were a bouquet made up of flowers gathered from the hills and the dale, chrysanthemums and patrinias.

It was as if done by a child, like they had picked flowers in the fields and simply tied them together and put them at the base of the sotoba plank. Some of the flowers were already wilted, followed by more still laid at their side and wilted, perhaps from yesterday.

Somebody was bringing frugal flowers on a daily basis, he thought. Wondering whose grave it was, Seishin looked at the sotoba. On the sotoba was Seishin's own writing, the name Yuuki Natsuno.

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6

Ohkawa stood in front of the store front glancing down the shopping district's street. A weak rain was sputtering down, making the scenery all the more choppy. Seeing past the town hall, the Gotouda Clothing Shop was closed. The other day his wife had met with Gotouda Kumi, and it seemed like at that time the shop was turned over to some relatives when Kumi and her daughter left the village and that night it seemed a truck had come to move them out.

That in itself might have been a small thing. But Ohkawa didn't like even small things like that. Gotouda Kyouko was remarried they said. Kumi went along with her they said. That should have been glad news but Ohkawa didn't like the taste of it. In that case, Kumi should have stayed in the village, and thinking of her mother, Kyouko should have threatened to give up on the marriage or otherwise convinced her partner to live in together with her. at least that was the rule of how things went in Sotoba. This was how things went in the village. And yet lately that rule wasn't being kept at all. It was being all too indifferently violated. Somehow Ohkawa could only view that as an affront to his own dignity.

He thought of the world as having "a way things should be." Until now--or until some point at least, the village had abided by that. One could say that now it'd been overturned so many times that there wasn't a single thing going the way it should in accordance with the rules.

The Gotouda mother and child handed over the store to some woman he didn't know and had never seen and left the village in

the dead of night. There were four other shops that had gone the same route, and one household whose house had been handled the same way. The general store's Tomikou left the village, and left it to some relatives only for some unknown, unfamiliar couple to move in. But those two stayed holed up in the house, without even a word of greeting to the neighbors. The shop too was essentially still closed. Sometimes, as if on a whim, the store would be open. That also only happened in the evenings.

August ended, the resident officer Takami had died, and his successor an officer by the name of Sasaki had come. But the number of people who had seen this Sasaki were few and far in between. At times he'd be seen at night sitting in the police substation but he had no idea what he normally did or what kind of action he took. At the start of September, Osawa from the post office had moved out. For a while Nagata had succeeded him as the chief of the office but in mid-September a new Post Master had been assigned, but he was another one he hadn't seen. Nagita once again took over acting the part, and he wondered if he had taken over the position.

In September, his own worker Matsumura's daughter died. Since then, Matsumura had a habit of skipping work. He'd never had much work ethic to start with, he was a coward whose only redeeming feature was his honesty but he was skipping work without calling in. Constantly making mistakes, Ohkawa was always shouting at him. Before he would be afraid of Ohkawa and straighten up a bit but since losing his daughter, Matsumura was indifferent to Ohkawa's moods. No matter how much he shouted, he wondered if Matsumura even heard him, given he only nodded and didn't become any more formal pr proper. He felt himself growing desperate over something. The tradesmen who came and went were always new faces now. Each time they deviated from the set arrangements, which angered Ohkawa. ---Not a bit of all this happening did he like.

The village wasn't as it should be. Somewhere the wheels were off the road, with no sign of anything getting back on track. Far from it, each day the deviation grew wider. The rules were being one by one trampled underfoot.

"Honestly... What's going on?" Ohkawa mumbled, putting away the sales receipts with a scrunched up face. The delivery slip. Just a bit ago he'd told Atsushi to go on the delivery but it looked like he hadn't gone yet.

"Oi! Atsushi!"

Ohkawa's angry voice carried up to the second floor. Normally this would be when his son would sullenly show himself but no matter how much he yelled he didn't appear. He didn't think he'd gone out and forgot to bring the slip with him. Wondering about that, he went up to the second floor seeing his son laying about lazily, still in his room.

"Atsushi! I done told you there's a delivery, didn't I?!"

Ohkawa entered the room shouting. Atsushi looked up but none of what should have been in his eyes was there. The resentment towards Ohkawa, the sulky, irresponsibility---In their place was surprise and submission.

His son turned dispassionate eyes to Ohkawa, turning over as if going back to sleep. Ohkawa was not used to being ignored by Atsushi like that.

"You punk, the hell you lazing around for? You didn't hear me? I said there's a delivery!"

Ohkawa kicked at Atsushi's back. Atsushi curled into himself and still gave no reaction. The blood rushed to his head. If Ohkawa shouted he obeyed. That was supposed to be a family rule. When he jeered at him and started to drag him along, his sister Tamami showed her face.

"Dad, Onii-chan is sick."

Ohkawa turned around. It seemed she'd just gotten back from school, as she stood there still in her school uniform giving a smile meant to soothe him.

"He was sick this morning too. I wonder if it's not a cold? Go ahead and let him sleep. If you're worried about the deliveries,

Yutaka and me'll help."

Ohkawa turned his eyes to Atsushi who groaned. "Whatever, it's obvious he's faking it. ---Oi, Atsushi, I can see right through you, you know!"

Atsushi didn't respond. He just kept his back to Ohkawa curling into himself. The bites on his tanned neck that were out of season for bugs went unnoticed by Ohkawa. Of course after he left he also didn't notice his son quietly murmuring "You'll see."

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The Japanese Agricultural Cooperative (JA)

- The JA is, in short, a government agency that lobbies for Japanese farmers and promotes their interests in government affairs. Examples include imports and overseeing standards and regulations for almost all farming enterprises, including real estate, insurance, machinery, taxes, etc.

In the 1900s Japan underwent several major governmental and ideological shifts, with departments merging, being terminated or reformed. During World War II, the current JA was reformed from the ashes of previous institutions overseeing agricultural coops and Kous (

Japanese RoSCAs

) in order to regulate agriculture during food shortages. This was to prevent sales of food products on the black market during the period of shortage. After the war, JA policies were generally conservative and subsidies and taxes alike made it cheaper for many to grow their own food rather than purchase it. This lead to many continuing to be farmers even if only on weekends with another full time job. These small scale farmers would often sell their land and keep only a small farming lot for their individual household. Still farmers and involved in the JA, these families proceeds frequently remain in JA bank accounts, which are then reinvested and used by the JA.

During the timeframe of Shiki (1994), the JA is a part of the Japanese National Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, though as of 2002 it was reclassified as a Special Civilian Corporation. During the time of Shiki, the JA had the authority to audit agricultural coops and to collect dues and fees from members of these coops.

The JA bank functions much like any other bank system, with investments, savings and loans. As of 2012, the JA Bank was the second largest megabank in Japan, with ¥88 trillion.

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1

Toshio returned from the house call and decided to at least show his face in the main wing of the house as he took in a late evening meal. In the main wing his mother was already waiting on him with a hard to read expression on her face.

With a response to Takae's "Welcome back," for the time being he focused on eating. He didn't have an appetite but his body wouldn't hold up if he didn't take in something.

"Are you going to be tending to Kyouko-san again tonight?"

Yeah, Toshio nodded.

"Kyouko-san, how is she?"

Who knows, was all Toshio replied.

"Are you sure we shouldn't contact her family. I don't want to deal with it, you know, her side of the family nitpicking about it to me when it's over."

"It's still not at that stage yet."

"But."

Toshio stared fixedly at the top plank of the table. The truth of the matter was that Kyouko had died and that four whole days had already lapsed.

Even if it was Toshio himself who could write out the death certificate, no matter how huge of quantities of ice he might have

used to stall off the post-mortem effects on the body, he was nearing the limit. ---No, Toshio had the feeling he was already past that limit. He had to make a decision here soon.

While on the one hand Toshio urgently wanted her to rise, another part of him couldn't help thinking that she just couldn't. Maybe some part deep inside of himself didn't really believe in things like The Risen, or maybe he just thought that something so conveniently lucky couldn't happen for him.

(Normally, she'd already be long buried.....)

The reason Shiki weren't known to exist was likely due to customs of cremation that made it so there weren't many of them, that was his own deduction, what Toshio believed. In other words, there wouldn't be a resurrection during any normal time frame of a wake and a burial. It wasn't unusual for the vigil to be the day after they died and for the burial to be the next day, and if it fell on Tomobiki then it was normal enough to put it off another day still. There were no shortage of cases in which 72 hours passed between death and when a body was turned over for cremation. In other words, didn't that mean that it would be fair to say that there weren't many who revived within 72 hours after their death? To put it another way, there was no point in waiting if one didn't wait at least three days, more than 72 hours. But that 722 hours had lapsed. There was no hope left, he thought as it drug on from the full fourth day into the fifth.

(All night tonight. I'll wait until morning, and if there's still no signs, I give up.....)

Toshio convinced himself of that. No matter how he thought about it, any longer than that would be too dangerous. Beyond that Toshio himself didn't think he could bear the pressure of harboring a dead body any longer than that.

(Right..... At this rate, another night would be hopeless.)

Lately even during examination hours he'd mostly been absent-minded. Each time he lost sight of where one of the nurses were, he'd worry that they mustn't have gone to the recovery room, or

that he'd made some blunder and that the body's decay continued on to the point of no return, a fear that he couldn't put out of his mind.

Toshio gave a faint, wry smile.

(Ironically, I might end up being the one who's turning to crime here.....)

Making up his mind and looking up again, his gaze met with Takae's own dubious stare.

"You, are you quite all right?"

Takae peered into her son's face. It must have been sleep deficiency, his inflamed red eyes were cloudy and blurred, with shadows hanging beneath them. Her son looked past the brink of total exhaustion.

"How about if you were to have help in providing nursing? If not that, then have her brought to the National Hospital, or."

No, Toshio murmured. ".....Probably, tonight will be the deciding point. Come tomorrow we might end up having to contact her side's parents."

Not even remembering whether he finished dinner or not, Toshio hurried to the operating room. There was no lock on the nurse's station. In the recovery room there was an inside-side lock on the door from the hallway but the door that went through the nurse's station didn't have a lock. If someone wanted to see how Kyouko was doing, anyone could get to the recovery room through the nurse's station. Feeling too uneasy leaving the dead body there, on the inside of the nurse's station door he'd added a make-shift latch, putting it where it wouldn't stand out. One could get in and out of the nurse's station through the operating room too but the operating room---the front room--was locked. Even so, with a duplicate key in the office, while this had been done to soothe his worries, it didn't grant him any peace of mind.

Hurrying up to the second floor he unlocked the front room. For a

breath of time, he hesitated to open it. In the room where Kyouko's body was laid out, he was all to aware that there was no lock to any door beyond this one.

(I'm being an idiot.....)

If there was somebody there when he opened this door, the person on the other side would be Kyouko. If it were the case that Kyouko had arose, there wouldn't be any need to put anything in place to barricade the door. From the inside she could open the hallway door and go out that way and go freely wherever she liked from there. So this was nothing but panic, and even knowing that, there was some part of him hesitant to open the door.

When he did push on the door, with a creek from the inside it opened. The small deserted room was cold and quiet. This was the front room, and to the right was the door to the operating room, and beyond that was the door to the sterilization room. With the light that poured from the pushed open door over his shoulder, Toshio could survey the small, narrow room, dark though it was. Of course there was no sign of anybody or their presence. Even when he turned on the light, of course there was nobody there. The curtain to the shower in the room was open. There was no place for anybody to hide here.

Crossing through the front room he went into the sterilization room. The lightswitch was immediately to his left at hand. In the dark room was the sink and the tool cabinet, the sterilization hatch and an autoclave and the like, things to hide beneath or other but really there wouldn't have been anyone there either, of course. Passing through the sterilization room into the nurse's station he stood before the door. He had to confirm that there wasn't the slightest noise, no presence within. Toshio himself didn't rightly know whether he believed it was possible she'd risen or not.

He resolutely opened the door. As he turned on the nurse's station light, his eyes went into the empty room. Of course there was nobody there after all.

He let out a light breath. For Toshio this was at once a breath of relief and yet a breath of disappointment. His eyes went to the wall

clock. The date was on the verge of changing.

(Until tomorrow morning.....)

Telling himself that he went into the recovery room. When he opened the door, there was a human figure laid out. It was the dead body of the woman who had been Toshio's wife. The light from the hallway was blocked by a partitioning screen and the light from the nurse station was obstructed by Toshio's own shadow. The bedside monitor shone on the wall, and so all he could see was Kyouko's shadowy outline. In the faint time before he'd turned on the light, a decayed and greatly bloated corpse rose to mind. If it had come to that, Toshio would have no way out. It was a hallucination that bore endless unease.

When he did turn on the recovery room light, he could clearly see Kyouko's face wrapped in gauze as it was until night time. Toshio approached the bedside and unwrapped the gauze with a sigh. At least it wasn't as bad as he'd expected it to be, he thought.

He was careful to keep the body temperature beneath ten degrees. Had that done the trick? Even though four days had passed, there was no sign of decay netting over her skin. There wasn't much swelling in her abdomen either. Just in case, he'd put a drainage tube into her abdomen to take care of the gas and fluid that would come from her decay but not much had really come out. He wasn't sure how much it would do against dehydration but for the time being he injected her with saline solutions and covered her face with wet gauze. It must have been because of that that her skin had mostly held off from becoming leathering. If this was the worst of it, he could still deceive them.

Toshio again gave a sigh of relief, checking her vital signs from the bedside. Her heart and breath remained ceased. Next he picked up the graph whose paper had run onto the floor. The machine reading for brain waves spit out a graph with a straight line. This's what it is, he thought with a wry smirk as his eyes followed the graph. Then suddenly Toshio's hand stopped pulling on the graph.

Without thinking, he looked between the graph and Kyouko. For an instant a very thin wave had appeared. Following the graph

further, there was yet another one. Between the time Toshio had gone out on the house call and taken in a late dinner, even if only three times, that vibration occurred. It really was a tiny wave. He thought it was a mechanical error. It was far, far too faint to think that it was any sign of resurrection.

Not knowing how to react to it, each time he looked between Kyouko and the graph, the graph would form another wave before his very eyes. Then with that it would return to a straight line.

He peered down gravely at the dead body. He lightly tried touching the neck, but the skin was completely cold. Of course there was no pulse. Her heart had completely stopped. Nor was she breathing. Her blood pressure was zero. Thinking to test for a pupillary reflex, he touched her eyelid. Touching the skin further cooled by the water, when he pulled up the eyelid, Toshio's body went stiff. The hand holding the penlight trembled. Even shining a light over the eye there was no response. He could tell as much seeing the light go through the clouded corena. ---Yes, the cornea was transparent. That evening when he'd checked it, it had been completely clouded over in white.

Toshio swallowed down a small breath. Approximately 48 hours after death, the corena should have been completely clouded, and he shouldn't have been able to see the pupil. Due to the cold temperatures the fog may have been stalled off a few hours but was he supposed to believe that once it had clouded it could clear back up?

Toshio stared at Kyouko's face. Again the sound of the EEG needle moving was heard. Maybe it was just because of that noise, but something about Kyouko looked too peaceful. Her skin that had taken on an aging tone looked to have recovered a strangely fresh luster.

"It can't be....."

He timidly pulled back the futon. He undid the belt securing the body to it. He tried gently lifting the arm. The stiffness had completely abated. It should have taken three or four days for rigor mortis to be relieved, but Kyouko's corpse had been preserved at

low temperatures. That stiffness shouldn't have faded this quickly. Even the post-mortem lividity on the bottom of her arms looked to be fading, he thought. Those purplse spots had been faint to begin with but were they always this light? Beside the worried Toshio's side, the EEG needle moved again.

He took in a deep breath several times, drawing blood from the catheter in her artery. The blood appeared to be a dark red but when he shined a light through it, there were thin, thread-looking lines of a fluid within it. When putting them under a microscope, the erythrocytes were completely fused but within those crimson parts he could see granules.

Toshio once again looked down at his wife.

This corpse was not entirely dead. It wasn't that it was not dead, it was very slowly----though quick, in terms of the physical processes involved---changing in a way different from decay.

Toshio leaned over Kyouko, staring pointedly at her features, then cupped his hands on the side of her face. For a time, he simply held her face there, framing it with his hands.

When it started to near dawn, the brainwaves began drawing waved lines incessantly. Those thin lines it had started as began to die out and could no longer even be seen. At the same time her rigidity had laxed, and the post-mortem lividity had clearly completely vanished. Her skin returned to a clean and fresh pallor, the clouds cleared from her cornea. Even so there was still no pulse. Her breathing too was still ceased. Her blood pressure remained at zero; Kyouko was unmistakably still a corpse.

Pupilary reflexes began to show around the time it began to grow light out. It was quite faint, but the pupils did clearly curtain when a light was shone. As the rays of the sun shone in with the light of dawn, Toshio could see Kyouko's complexion returning. Even so there was no change in her vital signs.

It was about seven in the morning when things began to feel abnormal. It looked like the color was returning to her face. A reddish tint began to rise, and within that clear red spots began to

form. That was when he had opened the recovery room window blinds to take a better look. Before his very eyes, blisters twinkled into form. Where the light touched her face and forehead, deep crimson spots and small blisters spread out. As he watched over this, quickly several of them burst, the skin tearing off, exposing the epidermis. Was it because of the sunlight, Toshio at last determined.

Kyouko showed no reaction. She didn't let out a scream, nor did she move her body. None the less, red growths and blisters covered and burst upon her white face like a film in fast forward. After a few minutes it came to a state that was painful to look at, when the burst and peeling skin began to blacken. ---It looked like it was carbonizing.

Toshio hurried to lower the blindes. When even that didn't stop its progression, in a panic he took out a stretcher. Transferring Kyouko to it from the bed, he transported her to the operating room. The front room and the operating room had no windows. It was carrying her into a room completely devoid of natural light that at last stopped the unusual response.

"This is a Shiki, huh?" Toshio murmured to himself. This was why they were prevelant in the night. Then---Toshio bit his lip. Kirishiki Seishirou and Tatsumi were not Shiki. In horror movies, vampires often had human servants. It was possible this was a similar affair. The fact of the matter was that Toshio had been completely played by Seishirou. He only showed himself at night, all intentionally to put on that display.

He'd have to swallow that bitter loss, but Toshio had a chance to turn things around. Kyouko, laid out on the operating table, was that chance. Toshio gave a thin smile. Locking up the recovery room and the operating room as before, he picked up the telephone. On the sixth ring, the other end picked up.

"Yes, this is the Hashiguchi residence?"

"Yasuyo-san? It's Ozaki."

Oh my, Yasuyo said. "What's happened? To call at this hour."

"Sorry it's so last minute but there won't be any medical examinations today."

"---Eh?"

Toshio managed to conceal his laughter, but it was a considerable struggle.

"Kyouko's condition isn't good. It looks like it's about at the critical point. Sorry to say, I just can't see any patients today."

Yasuyo was at a lost for words, though she would quickly offer a sympathetic voice. "I understand. I will contact the others. Doctor, do you need help?"

"No, I'm fine on my own. Sorry, but rather, please let me do this myself. ---No, there's not anything else that even can be done at this point. I just don't want to take my eyes off of her."

"I understand," Yasuyo responded mournfully.

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2

It was that morning when Motoko awoke at her usual time and went to awaken her children that she had realized Shiori had gone limp and spiritless.

Her face was pale and blue, no trace of her mischievous expressions. She spoke few words, almost as if still half in a dream. Motoko remembered seeing this expression before. Her father-in-law Iwao and her husband Isami were swiped away by it.

(This shouldn't be, happening.)

After all Shiori didn't go to the highway. She shouldn't be lost as Iwao and her husband were. Motoko was seized by shivers as she cradled up Shiori's body. After all, a six year old girl, losing one's six year old daughter, that was something that should just not be allowed to happen.

Motoko flew out of the house with Shiori in tow. Shigeki gave a confused "where are you going?" but Motoko couldn't even answer. She was fully absorbed in just getting out of the house.

Shiori's body was heavy like a stone as she ran through the neighborhood. Reaffirming her grip multiple times on the body that seemed as if it would slip from her arms, Motoko ran. The villagers walking along the road watched her, a strange sight to behold, but Motoko wasn't even aware of it. Unable to bear her daughter's weight, she fell onto the road onto her knees, aware that both of her arms were about to give out. Taking great pains to bear that weight, her breath was faint by the time she'd reached the Ozaki Hospital in Monzen. Like a drowning man grasping at straws, she rushed to the entryway.

Motoko was greeted at the entryway by a slip of paper. Pulling back the curtain at the inside of the entryway, on the paper stickied there she saw the words "No medical examinations today." Motoko collapsed there on the spot.

"That can't be....." Motoko murmured in the entryway. Her voice rang out. "Please! Please open!"

But the hospital remained closed, with no answer given. Only a woman passing by spoke out to Motoko.

"What's wrong?"

Motoko pointed to the paper in the entryway. The woman made a troubled face and furrowed her brows.

"Oh my--how unusual."

"Today... is Wednesday, isn't it?"

"Yes. And to think that lately they had even been open on Saturdays. I wonder whatever could be the matter?" the woman said, looking up uneasily at the building. "I've heard that the missus was in poor health but... I wonder if that could be what it is?"

"But..... My child is also not well."

"That's not good is it? But there's no examinations today."

But that's, Motoko thought feeling darkness threaten to overtake her. Why wouldn't he examine her, why wouldn't he save her? Her child was in danger and yet!

Shouldn't she have somebody to ask about whether Shiori's condition was really so bad? Or no--moreover perhaps she should have called first, or maybe she should have called an ambulance? --- At the time such prudence hadn't occured to Motoko. Shiroi was in danger, that was all that there was. She was going to die like this, like her father-in-law and her husband. She was going to be taken away from her, to somewhere where she couldn't reach her. If she didn't hurry to someplace that could assure her safety, she might really lose her daughter.

She had thought that and came rushing to the hospital but with them having decided at their leisure to close for the day, Motoko was driven even further into a frenzy. Somebody---somebody with malicious intent towards Motoko, was coming to mercilessly carry her daughter off away from her.

"Come to think of it," the woman said tilting her head. "I'm certain I had heard somebody saying that they had made a hospital in Kami-Sotoba, if I recall right?"

Motoko turned to face the woman.

"I get the feeling that I had heard that next to the Kusunoki Stand, the doctor of the Kanemasa family had opened a clinic?"

Motoko swallowed her breath. That was unmitakably an outsider. And furthermore she would have to go by that dreadful national highway to go to the gas station.

"If you like, should I go to ask somebody for more details?"

At the woman's voice, Motoko shook her head. Pulling Shiori onto her back she staggered to her feet. Steadying the load on her back she turned about.

"Oh dear---say, miss?"

The woman's voice didn't reach her. She had to go someplace. If she didn't hurry to someplace where somebody would save her daughter, she knew it would be hopeless.

(But...)

An outsider, ---the national highway. It was almost like some sort of trap. To save Shiori she needed to bring her to a doctor but it turned out her only choice was an outsider at that highway. That was what would take her children from her, and yet, as if it were some kind of trap, she had no choice but to go there.

While half crying, Motoko none the less readjusted Shiori on her back. Rushing from Monzeo to Kami-Sotoba, she tried to hurry even while staggering but Motoko's urgency still couldn't force her feet

forward.

(But, if I don't hurry.)

As quickly as possible. If she wasn't, it would be like her father-in-law and her husband all over again. She had no doubt it would become something she could never turn back.

While wheezing and sobbing, Motoko lost herself into the task of continuing down the road. By the time she had gotten to Naka-Sotoba, the elderly who had been in the road before her flew out of her way, looking at her as if they had seen something terrifying.

Is it really right to go there? she thought. As soon as she got to the national highway, wouldn't she meet with a wrecklessly driving car just coming around the bend? Was it really safe to have her looked over by an outsider? Shiori might have come from the examination room a cold corpse. While on the one hand terrified, on the other hand she wanted to have a doctor to see Shiori at any cost. If she didn't, then Shiori would be taken away from her.

Her hesitation tangled her feet. As if to scold her for her indecision, Shiori's weight on her back grew heavier. That was the weight of her daughter's life. She would rather die than forsake that weight.

With that determination in mind she continued until the highway. Cautious above normal definitions of the word, she sought out the area near the gas station. Immediately she knew the clinic the woman had spoken of. A sign board was put out. Motoko approached the door sobbing, finding it closed up tightly and taking a seat there.

(.....Why?)

At the side of the door was a sign with the hours of business. It was from seven in the evening until ten.

"---Oh no! Nee, open up!"

She wanted to bang on the door but both of her hands wer eoccupied. She absolutely could not let go of her daughter. Motoko

banged the door with her head. Her forehead knocked on the door. Even though she'd gone that far, nobody appeared to open the door for her. Motoko's voice went out in a sob. Shiori was going to die. She was going to be plundered away from Motoko.

She had let out a scream she couldn't hold in when a familiar, trustworthy voice came from behind her.

"Motoko!"

It was Kanami's voice. Motoko turned about. Kanami came rushing towards her kneeling beside Motoko. Behind Kanami were several dumbfounded villagers standing back to watch.

"You--what's the matter?"

Motoko cried out in a shrill voice. Kanami was baffled by Motoko's, one could sincerely call it, madness. She had heard that a woman who looked like Motoko had a child on her back, walking down the highway sobbing. A neighbor who knew that Kanami was friends with Motoko had come all the way to tell her about it. Thinking that was impossible, she came out half believing it and half doubting it.

There was only one thing that she could think of that would push Motoko to this level. That Motoko was here in front of the Ebuchi Clinic only reinforced that. Kanami timidly looked to Shiroi's face; while she was dead limp, seeing that she was breathing, Kanami let out a sigh of relief.

"Motoko, it's all right, now pull yourself together."

Motoko shook her head. She desperately wanted to let out her complaint but she couldn't find the words. But even without hearing it Kanami knew what she wanted to say.

"Shiroi-chan is all right, though. She's going to be more worried herself with you acting like that. So that's not good, you have to pull it together."

Kanami repeated that it was "all right" while holding Motoko around the shoulders. She rocked her until she had calmed down.

"Kanami, Shiori is!"

"Mm. She's sick, isn't she? It's all right, we'll take her to the hospital."

"But all of the doctors are..."

"Let's have her brought to the Junior Doctor at the Ozaki's," Kanami said, but Motoko shook her head.

"They are closed. He won't look at her."

My, Kanami murmured. Well, wasn't that unusual? ---But maybe not so unexpected. She'd heard that lately Toshio's place had been open without any days off.

"Right. Then, let's bring her to Mizobe. The quicker the better. Let me take Shiori. We'll call an ambulance to the gas station."

Motoko's eyes widened. "Ambulance?"

"That's right, that'd be the fastest, right? The national hospital or the mutual aid society's hospital will have all the equipment, and there'll be doctors there too. So it's going to beokay."

Motoko gave a dazed nod. As Kanami gave her a smile, she became aware of the voices of the people directly around them. Turning her eyes to them, she saw Maeda Tomiko hurrying forward, lead by the villagers. Somebody must have gone to let her know.

"Motoko-san---you!"

Kanami spoke over Tomiko. "Please stay with Shiori-chan and Motoko. I will go to call an ambulance."

"Now you stop right now!"

Kanami blinked at such a rough tone. Tomiko turned her glare to Motoko. She held onto Shiori as if she were going to take her away.

"For the love of, you! What are you thinking? Suddenly running outside, making such a shameful sight!"

"But..... Shiori's condition is."

Kanami spoke up. "Shiori-chan is sick. That is why Motoko"

"This has nothing to do with it, so be ever so kind as to just butt out!"

Kanami was lost for words in the face of Tomiko's hysterics.

"What's this, why, she doesn't even have a fever! What are you trying to say is the matter with her? Causing such a fuss, you're just pathetic!"

"But Mother-in-law,"

"Throwing such a fit over nothing! You really are just such a..." Tomiko glared at Motoko, having the limp Shiori stand. "Come, we're going back home. Today is a school day isn't it? Let's hurry back, you're going to school."

Oh no, Motoko wailed while trying to take Shiori back. Motoko smacked at her grabbing hands.

"You!" Tomiko said stomping her foot. "How long is it going to take for you to realize that nothing causes as many problems as the big hissy fits you throw over everything?!"

Tomiko glared at her daughter-in-law. Holding her grandchild's hand, she forcefully drug her back to the house. What drove Tomiko was a complete feeling of denial. Even Tomiko loved her cute little grand daughter. There was no way that that grand daughter could die. It wasn't even true that she was sick. No doubt that as usual her daughter-in-law was getting the wrong idea and throwing a fit again. It had to be that.

"Mother-in-law!"

Tomiko heard Motoko's desperate scream from behind. She had to get her grand daughter home and have her dress for school. If she went about as if there was nothing amiss, then nothing would be amiss.

Motoko tried to follow after Tomiko. But her feet wouldn't do as she wished. Kanami supported her, and while she wanted to cling back to her, she had no power over her own hands. Motoko could only stare at her mother-in-law's back with murderous intent.

---Everyone known and unknown was trying to take Motoko's children from her.

(It isn't only outsiders.)

For the first time, Motoko understood that everyone was an enemy.

sinnesspiel

3

That day, Toshio spent the entire day in the operating room watching Kyouko's transition from at her side. Her brain waves began to show consistent activity, small waves gradually drawing out a distinct pattern. Since noon there had been responses at times as if she were---funnily enough, the one dreaming, and yet her heart rate remained zero, her blood pressure was zero and her breath remained stopped.

The merciless keloid scars on her face had begun to heal since she had been brought to the operating room. The erythema gradually faded, the burst skin peeling away, the inner skin stretching out. By the end of the day, the approximate smoothness from before had returned. --No, if one considered the browning and the dehydration that had colored the corpse, then she might have even looked to be smoother and more glossy now by comparison. Now there was probably nobody who could look at her face and think that Kyouko was dead. There was a hint of blue to her but it only looked as if she were sleeping.

Toshio took blood samples several times. At first he had tried putting the catheter into an artery but that ended up being pushed back out. Since then he'd had to stick the needle in each time but even those needle points closed up quickly afterwards. They were completely closed by the time the blood smear preparations were put into a slide and under a microscope, to the point where one couldn't tell a needle had been stabbed in at all.

The blood was abnormal. The blood that had first presented as dark red gradually became florid bright red. In the dark red blood the decayed fragments of hemolyzed red blood cells were seen but they were not seen in the bright red parts. There was only a

concentration of red granules of something so small that a microscope was needed to see them. No other structure could be seen in it. Gradually the entire body was encompassed by them until at last even the venous blood was the same florid red.

Even when left alone, the blood he collected from Kyouko didn't coagulate. Nor did it separate. It only took its time in changing back to a darker red. Even when Toshio tried adding a drop of his own blood to the test tube it didn't coagulate. Far from it, the blood that had turned dark red returned to bright red. The same thing happened with serum. When putting a lid on the test tube to keep it air tight, it changed to dark red quickly. If the dark tinted blood were left for a time---over half a day--it would begin to partition, to show deposits. Once it had reached that point even if a serum were added, it would not return to a bright red.

A fundamental change was taking place in the blood. Even Toshio could understand that. He'd tried mixing various chemicals with it but none of them could provoke a reaction. It only responded to human blood.

On the other hand, as for Kyouko's body itself, it still showed no change at all. He didn't have a control sample for comparing and contrasting but it seemed one could say that around the time the fourth day became the fifth day, or on the brink of such, was the point of interest. The dead body could be determined to be one that would rise or not based on brain wave monitors. Even without recoding brain waves, if there was a blood sample whose color was observed, an estimation could be made. Speaking from Kyouko's case, one could tell by the color of the blood on the fifth day after death. It showed a visible change.

(A survey up to five days after death.....)

Toshio pondered. The problem was whether that would be possible or not. Since the bodies were buried in the village, burials took place quickly. Normally the vigils were on the day of death, and that meant the burial took place the next day. In the case of the Shiki there was a concentration of victims around midnight but normally the bodies would be buried within 36 hours of their death. Was there any way to drag that out until the fifth day? Even so,

there was the possibility that Kyouko's transformation was exceptionally fast. It may have progressed more slowly on a case by case basis. If that were the case, it would be near impossible to know just by looking whether a dead body would rise up or not. It was probably safe to say that it was impossible to predict whether they would rise between the time when the patient died and when it left Toshio's custody.

Was there a way to delay the burial until five days after death? If only he could defer it that much, it might have been possible for the body to rise up right there before the very eyes of the mourners at the funeral. If that happened, even if they didn't want to they would have to acknowledge the situation.

(It's a dead end no matter what, eh.....)

For example even if he could convince the villagers to put off the burial for five days, even if he could draw it out, he couldn't possibly get permission to leave them as they were for that entire length of time. At the very least he would have to put them on dry ice but if the temperature of the dead body were lowered too much, it was possible that that would delay the reaction. Taking that into mind, he would need to drag it out even longer until the burial. And so the same problem repeated itself.

(Then I guess after all I'll need to find a way to make sure no dead body will rise up.)

Or at least some way to stop the resurrection. --He'd need something like that to defeat the Shiki anyway.

Anyways, he knew that the blood was the fundamental thing to change. If that blood was destroyed, then that might have been the way to stop a rebirth. But at the same time, even as he injected every conceivable type of drug, there was no reaction.

It happened when he was deep in thought. There was a strange noise behind him. It was like a wheeze. Toshio slowly turned to look behind him. It was just after seven in the evening. ---Yes, he couldn't tell from within the operating room, but the sun was just setting.

Kyouko's eyes were opened too. Even without looking to the monitor, he knew that if there was no pulse, her respiration hadn't returned either. None the less, her bound body moved, confirming that she couldn't move, then turned only her head to look towards Toshio.

Toshio let out a single breath and then rose.

"……How do you feel?"

Kyouko moved her lips as if to say something but her voice wouldn't come out. For just a moment, there was a response on the breathing monitor, and then it again returned to a flat line.

She was moving. Surprised, in spite of her looking right at Toshio, her heart remained stopped. There was no tremor at all. The woman before his eyes was certainly dead.

He tried to use an ambu bag for artificial respiration but as expected her breath did not return. Trying to sooth Kyouko who had a terrified face, Toshio had tried a heart massage but while she let out a voice, as expected her pulse did not return. Likely, the abnormal dead body would not return to breathing or having a heart beat.

Kyouko wanted to voice some complaint. At times a dry voice would come out. When her voice did come, her chest moved. While it was only natural, if there was no breath, then she couldn't vocalize.

"You don't need to worry. I'll put you to sleep soon."

Kyouko's face was clearly in terror. Her mouth moved as if to gasp, as if to protest. Her chest moved several times as if convulsing. Intermittently her voice broke through. He had to put something over her mouth to keep the screams from getting out.

The nitrous oxide gas had no effect. The thiopental and ketamine likewise showed no response. Pentazocine and and morphine also showed no sign of effect. Anaesthetics and analgesics also showed no sign of taking. It was likely, beyond doubt, that even

administering a heavy amount of morphine wouldn't have any effect.

In any case, if I can't anesthetize her, there's no choice but to make her die as peaceably as possible, Toshio thought.

With her mouth bound, Kyouko tried to twist her body to escape her restraints but that was in vain. So it seemed like they didn't have any superhuman strength to worry about. There was no sign of her becoming smoke to escape, and it seemed like she couldn't become a bat to get away either.

"I'll make it easy on you in just a minute. So bear with me for just a little longer here."

Toshio borrowed the honzen from the family altar. Kyouko responded to it on sight. He tried spreading salt but the salt didn't evoke any particular reaction. Kyouko seemed to viciously hate the incense powder and burning incense but she had no response to ordinary scents or aromatics. Even if they both gave off a strong scent, the ingredients to incense powder were completely different from those in perfume. When thinking of it like that, that one would have a reaction and the other would not was not so strange, but reacting to the honzen was itself mysterious. He did try touching it to her body but no burn marks formed as one would expect in novels or in comic books. It just looked like pure fear. It was possible that there was a change in the brain, and because of that perhaps there was a fear response to certain images, patterns or shapes. She also hated the sound of bells. Clear metallic sounds in general evoked a fear response.

It was possible that magic was effective. It was no ordinary disliking, so as long as the Shiki weren't absolutely desperate, this might have been one way to avoid being attacked.

(The problem is.....)

It came down to how to put a stop to them existing, in other words. In Toshio's case, he wanted to find some secret way to treat the corpses. How helpful would it be if everything could be stopped with an injection before it started?

He'd tried administering barbiturates but as expected they didn't have an effect. He sought out pesticides and tried injecting paraquat but as expected there was no change. Cresol and steroids and disinfectants had no effect, and even injecting a large amount of air directly didn't show any change.

With no other choice he tried to cut open the thigh and slice the veins there for her to bleed out but as the cut closed up immediately it wasn't an effective means of bleeding her. He punctured the external jugular vein and tried to draw blood from that but as if that vein were being deprived specifically, suctioning the blood ceased to be effective. An incision was made in the antecubital region to expose the veins there and cut them open but again as if that portion were being cut off the blood ceased to flow. When he gave up to let that be, the next time he'd looked the incision wound itself had closed up.

They were frightfully strong against injury. It seemed their regenerative ability was absurdly powerful. It would probably be hard to harm them just lashing out wrecklessly.

Even plugging up the nose and mouth had no effect, since she wasn't breathing to begin with. Hermetically sealing off the blood itself would cause it to turn a dark red color so some sort of exchange of gasses must have been taking place but it might have meant that cutaneous respiration was good enough. He would know for certain if he could cover all of the skin, for example if he could submerge the body completely in water, but unfortunately he lacked the equipment to do that in the operating room.

Now that things have come to this, Toshio thought turning his eyes to the brain wave monitor. The first thing to revive from "death" had been the brain. If the brain were destroyed, it might become unable to move. Using a puncturing needle and a catheter, he tried to plunge into both the nose and ear to destroy the brain but it still didn't look to have any effect.

(Is it regenerating.....?)

It might well have been. It might have all started because of recovering from damages. Considering the miraculous recovery

ative abilities being shone, it might not have been impossible. There was no point in destroying tissue. Likely, isolating the blood--cutting off the oxygen supply was the way to go. I see, so the classical method should be the most effective. Cutting off the head, heart or liver, in other words to crush in the area where the aorta and vena cava were concentrated. If it was only a small pinhole, it would recover, and in fact the needles pushed into the body ended up being pushed back out. If it wasn't something alrge and decisive like a stake, it would be forced out and the wound would probably recover.

What would work was a stake. Possibly completely destroying the head. If that didn't work, then it meant that they were perfectly immortal.

Toshio took the stake he had prepared in hand.

sinnesspiel

4

Seishin at last left the temple office after a long meditation and contemplation. When he looked to his watch the date had already changed, entering into the early hours of the 21st.

Through the temple grounds, through the graveyard to the lumber path, he came out at the Maruyasu lumber yard. He set his eyes on the Ozaki Hospital, where the lights were on on the second floor.

He was opposed to hunting the Shiki. But some kind of plan of compromise had to be found. He couldn't ignore the village's distress any further.

Were the Shiki's lives the priority or were human lives the priority? The answer Seishin had to come to was obvious. Humans took priority. As to why, that was because Seishin was human. For Seishin who was not a Shiki, to treat Shiki's lives as if they were equivalent to human life was to transcend his own humanity. It was to look upon humanity as another, and even to look do so to the Shiki, thinking like a god, he realized. But Seishin was only a man. In that case he would have to hold the vantage point of a human, and doing that the answer was obvious. The Shiki were a threat, and thus an enemy. If they didn't kill them they would be killed. They had to exterminate the Shiki to uphold their own safety.

While half trying to convince himself of this, Seishin went towards the side staff entrance of the Ozaki Hospital. The staff entrance was locked. Since the light was on at the nurse's station, Toshio must have been up above with Kyouko. And so he pushed the interphone button. The answer was some time in coming. Before Seishin himself could say anything, he heard Toshio's voice asking:

"Seishin, eh?"

Right, he answered. There probably wasn't anybody else who would come at this hour without calling first.

"You came at a good time. My hands are a little full right now. The window in my room's open, so do me a favor and come in that way. I'm in the operating room."

Seishin tilted his head, but for the time being went towards the back garden. Entering into Toshio's bedroom, he crossed through the main wing of the house where everybody seemed to be sleeping with quiet, concealed footsteps towards the hospital. He went to the second story using the front stairs in the corner of the waiting room. As he passed by the sick room, he could see that only the nurse's station light was on. The recovery room was dark, and peeking in all he could see was the screen. It didn't seem like anybody was there, so he thought that Kyouko must have been taken to the operating room too. He wondered if the sickness had gotten that bad.

He was sure he should have been able to get to the operating room through the nurse's station, but when he put his hand to the door it was closed. He tried returning to the recovery room, but that was closed up too. With no other choice he went down the hallway to the free door pushing it open. The door to the front room opened easily.

Clothing was thrown and scattered about the seats of the front room. Looking towards the operating room beyond, Toshio was still in his white doctor's coat, bent over the operating table as he turned to look at Seishin. Surgical lighting shone above the operating table, over a white naked body from which Seishin averted his eyes without thinking.

"Take off your top clothes and gown up. They're in the wash room next door. While you're going there, take the clothes on the seats in the front room to the laundry room for me."

"Sure, ...But,"

Hurry, Toshio cut him off, once again turning to face Kyouko. Kyouko's face was white, her eyes firmly shut.

"Kyouko-san, don't tell me that she's,"

"She's dead."

I see, Seishin murmured in his heart. When he'd seen Toshio in his white coat, it had occurred to him that it was beyond the point of taking life saving measures now.

As he was told he returned to the front room, gathering up the scattered clothing to take to the washroom. While looking for the washing machine, Seishin became frozen in place. What were those test tubes lined up? Most had a dark red liquid in them, with most separating out. The brownish red samples prepared looked like they were spotted with blood.

"---Toshio."

Seishin peered from the washroom to the operating room. Turning around the corner, he saw Toshio's handiwork. Toshio was sutring Kyouko's chest. Above Kyouko's shoulder was a stake pulled out and stained with dark reddish blackness.

Seishin swallowed a breath. Toshio's eyes rose from his task. "It's just what it looks like. Kyouko's dead."

"......Did she, revive?"

Yeah, Toshio nodded. He cut the suturing thread.

"This--no, I guess it's already yesterday---evening she rose up. She just went to sleep permanently a bit ago."

To sleep permanently was a fitting phrase. Yes--an awoken corpse had its sleep disturbed. This was putting it back to sleep. And this time into a sleep that would be permanent. No matter what words one used to cover it up, it was killing a Shiki and that truth wouldn't change, but certainly calling it putting them to sleep would weaken the resistance on the hunter's part. That was the magic of words.

"It's messy," said Toshio, his white coat splotched all over with blood. The cuffs of his sleeves were bright red. "Gown up. Put on gloves too. It might be dangerous to touch bare handed."

While saying that, Toshio took of his white coat. He held it out towards Seishin. "While you're going, take this one to be washed too."

Nodding, Seishin took the white gown in hand as Toshio followed and sat down on the only chair in the washing room. Taking off his gloves and throwing them away, he lit a cigarette.

"Toshio....." Seishin sought out the detergent in the washroom, poured what looked like a suitable amount in and hit the switch. "What are those test tubes?"

"Kyouko's blood," Toshio said turning his eyes to the test tubes. "Looks like they're mostly dead, now."

"Dead?"

"That's probably the right term for it, anyway. That's most likely their real form. I dunno how to put it but the blood itself's alive, like, you know? I mean, it ain't like the blood itself is moving like an amoeba and attacking, but." Toshio leaned back into the chair heavily, completely worn down as he breathed out the smoke. For a while, he gazed as the smoke as if seeking something in it. "......Yeah, they're alive, I think. And they starve to death. Or maybe they suffocate to death. Once they die it separates out."

"The blood does?"

Toshio nodded. "Those ones that change color---the ones that haven't separated out yet, they go bright red again if you add human blood to them. They come back to life. The reason they attack people is probably based on that, I'm thinking." Toshio said, giving a sarcastic laugh as he looked as Seishin who still stood there bewildered. "Kirishiki Seishirou and Tatsumi aren't Shiki. They're probably human."

"That can't be."

"That's all I can figure. Kyouko reacted to sunlight. The sunlight's no good for them. They burn and blister."

Seishin found himself looking to the operating room. Toshio continued, still exhausted. "Even if it doesn't look like it, there's no sign of it left's all. Their ability to recover from injury's nothing short of miraculous. You can literally see it close up before your own eyes. A blade or a sharp edge or something used half-heartedly isn't going to stop them."

"……The stake?"

"Effective. Probably using a shotgun at close range or something would be too. Don't give them time to recover, destroy the blood vessel system in one go is the only way I figure. Or possibly, like the legends say, cutting off their head.

Their blood's alive. And their brain is alive. But the fact is that Kyouko's breathing and heart rate never came back. Just, before she herself rose up, brain waves appeared. For a while they completely disappeared but they came back. Whether they really stopped completely, or if they were just slight enough at the level where the machine couldn't pick up on them, that I don't know, but I think I can at least say that Shiki aren't brain dead, they're corpses with an active brain. What's alive is probably that weird blood. I can't say for sure, but."

Seishin blinked. ---Right, if Kyouko rose up, it could only mean she had died once.

"When did Kyouko-san die?"

"Five days ago…… On the 16th. After four full days the brain waves appeared, yesterday morning she started responding to the sunlight. She revived just past evening. I don't have any basis for comparison, so I can't say that all the Shiki revive about at that rate, but."

Seishin swallowed a breath. "……You were hiding it? That

Kyouko-san died? Why?"

Toshio murmured. "I thought she might rise up."

Seishin was at a loss for words.

"So even though she died, you didn't say anything and were hiding the corpse? You confirmed that she rose up, drove a stake into her and killed her.....?"

"I didn't have any other way," Toshio said, lazily closing his eyes. "Not a single drug had any effect. Their healing rate's abnormally high. Did seem like incense and smells like that had an effect. Magic works too. For whatever reason it looks like it provokes a fear response. Crosses, honzens, both got her to show signs of fear. But it doesn't seem like they're afraid of Buddhism itself. Seems like it's the spectacle that scares them. Like that radiation shape behind the Buddha's head. Same with the cross, a straight lines put into that shape must scare them. But the only reaction it evokes is a fear response. It'll be effective in repelling an attack but they won't put them to sleep for good."

Seishin could feel himself going pale. "Not a single drug had any effect? .....You tested them?"

Yeah, Toshio nodded. "So I figure there's no way to stop them from rising up after they're already dead. At least, not by any means I could do in secret. If we're going to stop them from rising up, we'd have to stake them when they're buried or cut off their head. There's no other way to stop those who have risen up or to keep them from rising up in the first place."

Sitting before Seishin who had lost his capacity for words, Toshio turned his eyes to his hand suddenly aware of it. It had burnt down to the filter; throwing it away, he turned around.

"Lend me a hand. For now we've got to clean up the operating room. We have to put Kyouko in clean bedclothes and get her back to the recovery room. ---Ah, and the wound'll have to be covered with a bandage or something."

"……Why?"

Asked that by Seishin, Toshio stood there looking at Seishin dubiously. "I can't let other people see her like that, can I?"

Toshio shrugged his shoulder. That wasn't what Seishin was asking about, but he didn't interject.

"I can't just keep other people from seeing that part. She'll have to be put in a white burial kimono and all. Explaining the wound itself I can probably get around saying it had to be done for treatment purposes or something like that, but I don't want anyone to really see exactly what kind of wound it is. All I injured was a corpse but other people probably won't look at it that way. They'll think I killed Kyouko for sure."

"Is that not exactly what you did?"

Toshio looked up and stopped on his way to the operating room, turning to face him. "What'd you just say?"

"You killed Kyouko-san. You hid that she died and preserved the corpse. You used her once she revived for a lab experiment, and at the end of it you killed her."

"Seishin," Toshio's mouth opened. "It wasn't like that and you know it."

"It wasn't like that? What part was wrong?"

"Listen, Kyouko was,"

"Kyouko-san was ill. With an unknown illness. It's possible that that was the result of being attacked by the Shiki. But none the less, she died. And then she rose up."

"Exactly. Kyouko became a Shiki."

"Then answer this, what is a Shiki? Setting aside the reasons behind it, they are patients who died of a disease whose initial symptoms are anemia. They die and a strange post-mortem phenomenon occurs. For whatever reason it seems like after a fixed

period, they revive. ---Doesn't this mean that by the real meaning of death, they are not dead?"

"Kyouko was dead."

"If she revived, she is not really dead. Isn't a part of the definition of death that it's irreversible? Since she revived, no matter how much it resembled death, it was not death. It was only an apparent death. Patients that appear death rise. These risen patients, they attack people. This strange disease spreads by means of these attacks."

"I told you, they're vampires!"

"You're free to call the disease with these symptoms "Vampiric Illness" if you want. But it doesn't change the fact that you killed a patient who revived from an apparent death."

"Listen," Toshio said thrusting a finger out at Seishin. "Kyouko died. She woke up but during that time she had no pulse and no breathing, her heart was stopped. She didn't come back to life. That was a corpse."

"And the medical basis for that is? What's the definition of "death' that you're proposing?" When asked that by Seishin, Toshio kept his mouth shut in spite of wanting to speak. "Was she really dead, was that really a corpse? Can you objectively say that without any doubt?"

"She was---"

"Death is irreversible isn't it? Can you call a reversible death death? Do you need to reacquaint yourself with the definition of death? Or can you just declare that a body that's not breathing and has no pulse is a corpse? Does a corpse have brain waves? Why would a corpse move?"

That's, Toshio faltered.

"Wasn't what you should have been doing been finding out whether Kyouko was really dead, why, if she was, the corpse was moving, why something thought to be dead revived, finding the

source of that, and seeking a medical treatment for that?"

And yet Toshio was seeking a way to kill her. He used his own wife. That was the reason he went through the trouble of hiding her death, of hiding her corpse.

"If you could say that it was to save your patients, I would cooperate with you completely! ---But, if it's to obliterate patients who go against your understanding and common sense, I cannot cooperate."

Toshio looked up and leveled a glare directly at Seishin.

"Then lemme ask you this, how do you want it? What will it take to please you?"

"That's,"

"The deaths are continuing in the village. The victims they attack are dying. Are you saying to leave it be and watch it carefully? The Shiki being killed is cruel and people being killed isn't? Refusing to be their food, taking steps to repel the enemy to protect ourselves is unforgivable? ---Nobody wants themselves or their own family to die. Even you yourself, didn't you say that you wanted to put a stop to this? If it's a disease, it should be stopped but if it's because of the Shiki attacking we should just let it be, is that how you want it to be?!"

This time it was Seishin's turn to be pressed for silence.

"If we show consideration for where they're coming from, are they gonna make concessions too? They must have to attack people. If they don't attack people, they'll starve. Probably if they starve, the blood dies, and the person does too. So to avoid that they desperately attack people. You pity the Shiki and won't hunt them, so what, do b you plan to tell them to stop attacking and die that way? Are you thinking they're going to take you up on such an unreasonable demand?!"

"……That's,"

"That part of you's insufferable cowardice! At the heart of it, you

just don't want to dirty your own hands. So the Shiki rising up isn't something you couldn't call coming back to life. Maybe so, I mean, the brain was moving. The person themselves was probably thinking even. They got feelings. If you base it on all that, there's no difference between them and people. If you call killing erasing a single personality, then hunting the Shiki and killing a person might be the same. And you're not a Shiki. So you don't need to dirty your own hands killing anyone. That's why you can approve of Shiki hunting humans. Hunting the Shiki means getting your own hands dirty. You'd have to take part in the massacre. So you're saying you don't wanna. ---Am I wrong? "

"……That's it precisely," Seishin sighed. "I don't want to become a mass murderer. Because I don't think that fatally wounding another, no matter how much of a just cause there is behind it can be justice. It isn't that I approve of the Shiki hunting humans. Be they Shiki or be they human, I think that one should not slaughter others. But, as to whether Kyouko-san attacked others or not to prolong her existence, that it something that should have been left to her to decide. That is not just an argument that I'm making verbally. Even if I could condemn her actions, I could not order her to do this or that. The only one whose actions I am able to control are my own."

"And so even if they are a Shiki you don't want to kill them, and that's your own freedom of choice, you wanna say, right?" Toshio's mouth tapered into a warped smile. "Right now you and me are the only ones who know what's really going on in this village, and us standing here and letting the Shiki do what they want saying it's their right is an act that indirectly approves of and leads to other people being slaughtered, but that's not your problem, in other words."

That's not it, he wanted to say but even he himself wasn't sure if that wasn't in fact what he meant.

"You can criticise but you can't order? Just before, when you were blaming me for murder, you mean to tell me that was just criticism?"

Seishin hung his head. Toshio spit out: "Since you don't seem to get it, let me spell it out for you. People like you are called

hippocrites."

That we are, Seishin murmured in his heart.

"I made a choice, I acted on it. I can't just let the contamination spread. So I'll hunt the Shiki. They're my enemy, so even if they're a part of my own family I'm not letting them off. This is my justice. Unless you've got something to say about that, get out. I don't have time to listen to your "criticisms." "

Seishin had no words to return to that. And so, he did exactly as he was told.

There was no mistake in Toshio's labeling him a hypocrite, he thought. Seishin didn't want to hunt the Shiki. Indeed, it was true that he didn't want to dirty his own hands. He didn't have the courage to take an action classified as a sin. He couldn't build up the murderous intent to decisively commit a sin just because they were a threat to him and his own.

Whether they were human or not didn't make a different. He didn't want to kill anyone. To tell the truth, if all of the people---he wished for the Shiki's wish to come true. If it did, the God that he believed in, that reasoning would become universally consistent, as he wished.

(People.....)

Seishin thought, trying to make a playful excuse for himself as he went.

(Either can desire to kill, or there are those who cannot desire to kill.....)

When faced with a threat, there were herbivores who could not do but flee, and there were carnivores who could intimidate that threat, who could repel it. He wasn't a carnivore, and so he did not have such bloodthirsty logic within him; would that excuse work?

While thinking he returned to the temple. Dejected, he turned to the temple office desk. What a cowardly and unjust sheep he was. He could only go on living while munching on bits of grass while

holed up in a safe place.

While thinking, he opened the drawer. Taking out the manuscript, he then cocked his head.

(Somebody.....)

Something about it seemed just faintly off. For example, the sides of the Japanese writing paper, the corners. It made him think of when he'd passed his manuscript to an editor, when it had passed through somebody else's hands before returning to him.

(Somebody touched it? .....It couldn't be?)

Neither Mitsuo nor Miwako laid a hand on Seishin's desk. Much less did they ever pull out the drawer and look inside.

Tilting his head he turned the manuscript paper over. None of the numbered pages were missing. Taking stock of all he had written he aimlessly looked over the paper, and that was when Seishin's hand stopped.

There was writing in the margins of the paper. Lightly pencilled letters. Of course it wasn't in Seishin's handwriting, as Seishin did not write in the margins.

Why did he kill his little brother?

Seishin stared fixedly at those letters.

The older brother gave in to a whim. He didn't feel like writing more than that. Just as Seishin himself had, he had just been driven by a meaningless impulse. It was precisely because he didn't have the desire to kill that the older brother who wandered the wasteland's anguish was so deep---.

While thinking, Seishin paged further into the manuscript when he once again came upon the writing.

Killing without the intent to kill is an accident, not a murder.

There is no murder without the intent to kill.
There is no intent to kill without a reason.

Seishin stared at the writing was a hollowed out feeling. Those letters had arrested his gaze.

(But,) Seishin stared at the writing. (……There really wasn't any reason at all.)

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Links to Chapters
12 - 1
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No cultural notes this chapter.

I'm starting on a translation glossary of names. I'll try not to miss any characters, but if any astute readers happen to notice that a character physically appears in a chapter and the chapter isn't tagged with their name let me know. I'm not counting non-Shiki unmoving or non-responsive corpses as "appearing," so for example the chapter where Ozaki examines Gotouda Fuki's body isn't tagged with her, but the portions where Kyouko is responsive (brain waves, blistering in the sunlight) are tagged for her.

I'm also collecting mention-only characters and links to where they're mentioned.

Example: Gotouda Kyouko, daughter of

Gotouda Kumi

, never makes an appearance directly but is mentioned as existing in

3-2-4.

Example 2: an unnamed man from the Ebata family (none of whom ever appear directly) is mentioned in

1-1-4

. Even if his first name isn't given, there is a family name to

translate.

A lot of these one-time wonders are easy to miss. If you're rereading old chapters and come across someone you think I may have missed feel free to comment either in that chapter itself or on the family tree page or here with who the character is and where they're mentioned. A good sign I've missed them is that they're not listed on the

Family Tree

page; I've tried to scope ahead for characters not yet even mentioned (I don't think Hirosawa Takafumi's been mentioned yet but I know he works at the town hall at some point later), but I still find some and add them as I go.

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The phone rang as Seishin returned to the temple office after finishing performing the Buddhist services. Having a premonition of what that phone call would convey, he decided not to answer it. Mitsuo picked it up and after a bit of back and forth came to Seishin with the phone in hand.

"It seems like the young madame of the Ozaki's has died."
Is that so, was all Seishin replied with.
"I'd caught wind of rumors that she wasn't doing well but to think it was that bad," Mitsuo said to nobody in particular, continuing on. "Gohei-san has just done two families, so it seems that the Tamo's Sadaichi-san will fill in for us. He will be coming over directly to meet with you."
"Understood."
Just as Mitsuo said, Sadaichi had hurried directly over, putting together all of the arrangements for the funeral. This was in spite of just having had a funeral for his own household the day before. The vigil would be tonight, the burial the next day, and given Toshio's tastes it didn't need to be a big funeral service, it was decided.
"After all, things what they are, you guys at the temple are short handed too, so we'll handle it internally and you guys don't have to go to any special trouble, he said," Ikebe said seeming grateful for Toshio's consideration. "To be honest, he really saved us. Even if he did tell us to make it big, we don't have Sumi-san anymore and Tsurumi-san is apparently sick too now."
Seishin nodded. When he found the time he had tried calling Sumi's home and asking how he was. He supposed he'd be told that Sumi had died but contrary to his expectations he was only told that Sumi wasn't there. Sumi had suddenly said he wanted to go on a trip, and that he left without any written notice. He thought that it was likely to be a trip he wouldn't return from, but Seishin couldn't exactly state that to them.
At any rate, since he had contacted Sumi's household, he had asked whether Sumi's father or older brother could assist as officiating

monks. The rather flippant way the word "Again?" came out again made him aware of how isolated the village was from the outside world. In the village the word "again" had already become forbidden. With the two from Sumi's place and Ikebe, with Seishin altogether the temple had four people. The temple was short handed but indeed if the family involved were the Ozakis; no matter how much they were told to keep it simple they couldn't have fewer people than that attending.
"It feels like it's been a long time coming," Tamo Sadaichi sighed. "Really, I get the feeling that there are fewer families that haven't had a funeral."
Saying that he looked fleetingly to Seishin. It was a look that seemed to be imploring him about something, but Seishin could not answer the unspoken question.
The one who conveyed news of her death to Ritsuko was Hashiguchi Yasuyo.
"The Young Madame? She's passed away now."
Ritsuko couldn't find her words. Yesterday she had been told that her condition was grave enough that they were closed for the day so she had been prepared. Even so, hearing that she had in fact died weighed on her heart.
"Tonight's the vigil, tomorrow's the funeral. Today and tomorrow it seems like the hospital will be closed."
"Yes..... Of course."
Ritsuko picked out her clothing and left the house. She had to go to help. But indeed thinking of what to say to Toshio weighed heavily on her mind. Maybe he had felt guilty about overlooking the initial symptoms, for he had been providing constant care to her. But what good as it? Looking back on it, despite providing more vigilant care than to any other patient, it ultimately meant that even Toshio couldn't do anything against this disease.
(.....Disease?)
That thought secretly seized her heart. Was this really a mere epidemic? She had a feeling she already knew the answer to that but she didn't want to accept that, no matter what.
Traveling the quite familiar road, the hospital came into view. When she reached the hospital, she went through the side gate to the entryway of the main household. How many years had it been since she had come here? Things were already being set up in the entryway for the funeral.

Ritsuko was a bit surprised to see Tamo Sadaichi amongst the gathered people, seeming to be directing them. The Tamo's place had just had a funeral the night before.
(But..... Tokujiro-san isn't here anymore, so.....)
Monzen's mourning crew caretaker was on the death register. She had thought that Takemura Gouhei would fill in as the next in line for caretaker but old man Gouhei who was not used to the task had already just managed two in a row recently. Perhaps they had no choice but to have Sadaichi fill in. She wasn't aware of the sigh that she leaked out. She couldn't avoid thinking of this as a sign of how dire the distress of the village was.
Giving her greetings to the gathered people she went into the entryway. Mutou and Yasuyo were already In the spacious entryway hall. When asked where Toshio was, Yasuyo shook her head.
"He's asleep."
"He's.... sleeping?"
Yasuyo smiled faintly. "He must be utterly exhausted. You should have seen how terrible he looked when I first came and saw him. So I'd told him to please sleep, myself" Yasuoyo said before lowering her voice. "It might not be the most appropriate time for it, but at last there are no pressing medical exams or patients whose conditions need to be watched over for the time being. That almost never happens, you know, so if he doesn't rest now, then..."
"That's true."
"Now the head Madame, she's in the tatami room."
Ritsuko nodded and headed towards the tatami room. Ozaki Takae was already in place beside the altar, holding herself back. Ritsuko had said conciliatory words, but Takae was disinterested in them. Rather, she was clearly in a foul mood.
"I am sure this must be a very hard time for you..."
Takae brushed off Ritsuko's cliched lines with a sigh. "If only she had at least left behind a child. I don't know what is going through the heads of today's youth, but she was so caught up in herself that it was as if she just didn't have time for children."
"Haa....."
"And Toshio too, there was no need for him to go to such lengths, but he's soft on people, that boy. And when we were bound to be so busy with the vigil and the funeral, I certainly hope he isn't on the verge of collapse himself, but."

Troubled as to how to respond, Ritsuko gave a vague nod. Giving only the stock lines of mourning, she quickly retreated towards the entryway. Having imagined about how the exchange must have went, Mutou gave her a wry smile and told her that Yasuyo had gone to the kitchen, and so Ritsuko headed to the dining room. Yasuyo was wearing an apron she had taken from the kitchen and making preparations for tea.
"Good work enduring it," Yasuyo said with a wry smile. "---Well, there is no doubt about it that the doctor's condition is more worrisome right now."
"That's true." As Ritsuko gathered up an apron herself, she showed a vague smile. "It looks like the funeral is being kept as simple as possible. Though with that said, since it is the Ozakis, the temple can't take it easy even so."
"That's why the madame's in such a foul mood, isn't it?" Kiyomi joined in with a small voice, tinged with a laugh. Kiyomi was making a dour face. Looking at that face, Ritsuko had thought that she was imitating Takae but it seemed that was not the reason that Kiyomi was making such a sullen expression. "Yasuyo-chan, Ricchan, don't bother in here."
Eh, Ritsuko said tilting her head.
"Because they're having the the neighborhood female helpers tend to the kitchen. They said that they wanted us to do other preparations," Kiyomi said, sitting down in the dining room. "Sadaichi-san was begged. Please have the neighbors tend to that part. They said they didn't want the nurses to have any hand in the cooking."
"That's..... not a problem, but why?"
"The epidemic," Kiyomi murmured quietly. "There are rumors of a terrible disease spreading around. The neighbors are saying things like wondering if we should be touching things that people will be putting in their mouths."
Ritsuko was at a loss for words. Yasuyo too could only say "My," and nothing more.
Indeed, though, Ritsuko thought. The nurses were on the very front lines against any "terrible disease." If this were an ordinary epidemic, there would be a chance of direct infection, and there would be the possibility that the nurses themselves were already carriers. It wasn't as if she couldn't understand the uneasiness they must have held.

As they all sat in a well kept silence, Satoko arrived. Yasuyo called out to her while taking off her apron. "Thanks for working today. --- How'd it go? Did Yuki-chan call back?"
No, Satoko said with a dark expression. Yuki was still missing, with all details still unknown.
"I tried calling her family too, but she hasn't contacted them either."
"I see..... That's worrisome, isn't it?"
Yasuyo let out a deep sigh. Ritsuko too secretly let out a breath. Really---sighing was all they could do. Telling Satoko about the situation, they didn't bother with the kitchen and went again towards the entryway. While avoiding the unpleasant stares of the people gathered there, they were directed by a very apologetic Tamo Sadaichi towards the reception parlor.
"I'm very sorry about this. If you could, handle the account books and the office work."
Yasuyo nodded. Sadaichi sighed.
".....Really though, just what is going on in this village? We just had a funeral last night at my place, didn't we? With all this, we're being hit hard all over again."
"Oh my, Sadaichi-san, your family too?"
That's right, Sadaichi said with a sad smile. "Though it isn't like I don't understand caution about the houses who've had a death. The Maruyasus and the contractors said the same thing. Especially with the contractors having one after another, the head clerk Takeda from there said that there were families that gave him dirty looks just for coming and going through there."
Yasuyo breathed a sigh. "There's no hope for this world, is there?"
"..... Not that avoiding anybody would do any good against this, though." Sadaichi said off to himself. When Ritsuko and the others tilted their heads, he must have realized the words that had slipped out; he gave an uncomfortable, awkward smile.
"No, I just mean, when you get old you start to think strangely, to misunderstand some things. So as it is, I get to thinking like that. Thinking, is this really an epidemic, things like that. It feels like it's something more---like it's something else."
"Something else?"
"What that something else is supposed to be, now that I don't know," Sadaichi laughed off. He said he didn't know, but Sadaichi seemed like he had something specific on his mind.
And Ritsuko had that same thought in mind. Somebody who looked

like Yasumori Nao. The memory itself had worn away to seem more like a dream but it had still stuck with her.
As they collectively sighed, Takae's voice rang out.
"My, all of you, what do you think you are doing, taking it easy in here?" Takae peered into the open doorway into the parlor room, scowling. "If the lot of you can't take the initiative, that will be quite the problem. The neighbors wouldn't know their way around our kitchen. Yasuyo-san, go and direct them, why don't you!"
Well, that's, Yasuyo said looking to Sadaichi. Sadaichi tried to explain the situation to Takae. Takae interrupted him.
"As for the office work, isn't that what Mutou-san is for? That is his specialty, so please leave that to him. Yasuyo-san, I will have you go to the kitchen. I won't have the women of the neighborhood tampering in the kitchen as they please. And in the first place, if the lot of you don't do the brunt of the work, do you know how that will look to the outside? You aren't guests here after all!"
"But we aren't exactly servants either." It was Satoko who spoke. Takae narrowed her eyes at that.
"It seems you are forgetting who pays your salaries."
"Indeed, I do receive a salary from the doctor. But that is payment for my services as a nurse at the hospital, I'm not some servant of the Ozaki family."
"Sato-chan," Kiyomi quietly rebuked. She could see Takae's expression shift.
"Really, Toshio is too easy on people! Taking such precious care of rebellious nurses like these. If I were the master of the house, I would see to it that you resign immediately, myself."
"I wouldn't mind so much. There are plenty of hospitals in need of nurses."
"What's this? The mouth on you! We've taken care of you up until today. If that is how you feel, then quit and go off to wherever else you like, why don't you?"
"I may just do that," Satoko carelessly thew back. "……Yuuki-chan went missing, and the doctor isn't even worried. If that's how it is, then I am starting to feel like I don't care anymore either."
"Sato-chan," Kiyomi again scolded. Satoko looked up to Kiyomi, tears brimming.
"But we don't know where she went? It's been this long and she hasn't called, isn't it obvious that something's happened? An accident, or something worse. But the doctor just said 'Is that right?'

and never even asked what came of it!"
Kiyomi wordlessly placed a hand on Satoko's back.
"That's, I know, I understand that the doctor is troubled with what happened with the young madame. She is his wife, I'm sure that he was worried, that he had a lot on his mind? But Yuuki-chan has been working here through all of this too. Things looked hard on the doctor, so she said let's move here, she gave up her days off and kept coming in, and yet he... ---And still, he...!"
Ritsuko rubbed Satoko's back as she covered her face and sobbed. She understood Satoko's worries, she understood them painfully well.
Takae gave Ritsuko and the others who comforted her a grim glower. "Did you think for even an instant that the wife of the director and a nurse would be treated with the same level of importance? But then again, you do seem to be a child who can't understand the order of such things."
Saying that, Takae turned back. Sadaichi looked with bewilderment between where Takae had been and where the sobbing Satoko were.

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2

As he ate breakfast, Ohkawa's eyes turned countless times towards the second floor--towards the ceiling. Kazuko watched her husband in suspense.

Her husband was in a foul mood. It was because Atsushi hadn't woken up and come down. Seeing her husband's gradually mounting anger, Kazuko spoke up in a deliberately bright tone.

"That Atsushi, I wonder what could be wrong? He said that he was sick before, I wonder if he still isn't feeling well? Mizue, go take a little peek in on him, would you?"

Mizue, in her school uniform, nodded. As she moved to stand, Ohkawa himself stood up.

"You keep eating your breakfast. I'm gonna get him up."

"It's fine. I'll go. I think Onii-chan probably really doesn't feel good."

I've got it, Ohkawa spit back as he left the tea room. Whatever the case, saying he didn't feel good or whatever was obviously just Atsushi's excuse. He'd always been lazy, coming up with whatever excuse it took to skip out on work. Lately, he'd seen misfortunes and illnesses were continuing throughout the village, no doubt that he thought that if he said he was feeling sick too that they'd be easier on him.

Ohkawa went up to the second floor and opened the sliding door to Atsushi's room. Far from being in his futon, Atsushi was on the laundry hanging balcony outside of his room sprawled out like the kanji for big (大).

"Atsushi, how long you gonna just laze around sleeping?!" Ohkawa screamed in outrage as he stormed into the room, but his son showed no signs of being flustered or of moving. Going through the wide opened window, he went out onto the laundry balcony.

(Sleeping without a damn care in the world!)

That's what Ohkawa thought when he saw his son's face. Seeing that he showed no signs of waking when he called out to him, he gave him a violent kick. He thought that'd send him flying awake, but Atsushi remained sprawled out even as kicked.

Weird, he thought immediately. Ohkawa leaned over his son's side. Instead of his night clothes, he was in a jersey, heavy with the morning dew that it absorbed. He lightly tapped his cheek and found it chilled.

"Oi, Atsushi," Ohkawa called out, shaking his son. After holding his hand out in front of his nose, grabbing him by the nape of his neck and shook up, he finally realized that his son was dead.

---At last, it's come.

Ohkawa thought promptly. Spreading through the nearby houses, "that" had wiled its way in to plunder into the Ohkawa's family home, at long last.

Ohkawa went downstairs. An uneasy looking Kazuko and his mother looked at Ohkawa.

"Kazuko, have a look at Atsushi for me. .....It looks like he's dead."

Kazuko let out a shriek. Mizue and Yutaka all but fought to see who could step out of the room first. Namie followed after the both of them, flustered.

Ohkawa was overwhelmed with a bitter feeling as he took up the phone. He was so irritated it was as if his insides were going to boil over. Things that weren't supposed to happen, that something that went against the rules could happen to him was unforgivable. It was cowardly and unfair, said the resentment burning in his throat, but

he didn't know who to unleash it towards.

Through his upset he called the Ozaki clinic. There was an answer right away, but when he heard a woman's voice he didn't recognize, he knew it meant they were closed today.

"Actually, it seems like our little punk's died. Could I have the doctor come by?"

That's just, the woman's voice on the other end of the phone said, bewildered. "The truth is we've had a misfortune here, too. The Young Madame has died. Today is the vigil....."

Ohkawa clicked his tongue. Saying his thanks to the one who conveyed their condolences, he hung up. Should he call for the emergency hospital in Mizobe or should he call an ambulance? Come to think of it, there was talk of a clinic in Shimo-Sotoba, wasn't there?

Thinking about it, he suddenly became uneasy. The Young Madame of the Ozakis---which meant the same Kyouko who had a shop in Mizobe. If Ozaki Kyouko was dead, the funeral service was going to be large scale. When the predecessor had died it was a very fine funeral too. It was possible the temple would have their hands full with it.

After some hesitation, he tried calling the temple. A man's voice that sounded like Mitsuo answered but when he conveyed that his son had died, he seemed similarly at a loss.

"Boss, I'm sorry to say this, but....."

"About Ozaki's Young Madame dying?"

"That's right. After all, it is the Ozaki family, and the Junior Monk really must go, which means....."

"Aa, that's true enough."

"There are also other memorial services. If we can shift the day, then I think that we can somehow make things work out, but."

"Naw, it's fine. Can't be helped since it's the Ozakis. They're a Parish Family Representative there and all too."

That's what Ohkawa said as he hung up the phone but the heat broiling over his insides was choking up his breath. He formed and raised a fist to let out his anger on something, anything, but unfortunately there was nothing to take that for him.

He knew the connection between the temple and Ozaki. Even so, Ohkawa couldn't escape the feeling that he was being made light of. Unable to let out his resentment, he called the Mourning Crew Regional Manager for the Sotoba community, Murasako Munehide. Munehide listened to the circumstances and was at a loss for words.

"It is the Ozaki's, isn't it?"

"You said it. That said, I can't just leave my son out here all pitiful like this forever, you know? And it ain't like the Temple's the only ones who can do a mourning service."

"That's true enough. ..... Now that you say that, a funeral parlor's been built in Kami Sotoba. Their director came around before giving his greetings, I've got his business card. You want to try giving them a call?"

"Aa, there was some talk about that. I'll give it a try. Sorry to be puttin' virtue aside like this 'n all but we can't really wait for the Temple to have an opening, you know?"

That's right, Munehide said, telling him the phone number to the Sotoba Funeral Parlor. At the parlor they answered the phone immediately. When he conveyed the situation, the man on the other end responded in a somewhat shrill voice.

"Are you certain that he is dead? You have not yet called for an ambulance?"

"No need to call 'em, no doubt about it that he's dead. He ain't been seen by a doctor, we don't got a death certificate yet but."

"Is that so, I understand. We will be right over to see about tending to your most honorable son. Oh no, don't you worry. We

will also tend to washing and preparing the body for the service. At that time we will also discuss the particulars. ---Ah, there is also no need to worry about having a death certificate written. We will send out the Ebuchi Clinic. When he has the time, we will have the doctor come out to write down a few lines as needed. We will take care of every step including delivering it to the Town Hall, so please do not worry at all."

"That right. That's helpful," Ohkawa said, throwing down the phone to hang it up. He could hear the women's crying voices on the second floor.

"I knew my son was no good," Ohkawa said, his mouth twisting. "……But now it's gonna be done no good to the end with him."

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3

Katou Minoru saw the light on in creole and opened the door to see that the only customers were Hirosawa and Tashiro. It was already nine o'clock and the sign saying that they weren't open was hung but the Master, Hasegawa, gave him a welcoming smile.

"Welcome. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Yes, Katou murmured. A certain gloom hung over the shop interior. Maybe he had such an impression because Hirosawa and Tashirou were in mourning clothes.

"Hirosawa-san, was there a---Ah, at the hospital."

Hirosawa nodded. He heard that Kyouko from the Ozaki Hospital had died. Katou himself didn't have a particularly deep connection to Ozaki Toshio, much less to Kyouko.

"I heard the Ohkawa Liquor Shop's Atsushi-kun has died too."

Hearing Katou say that, Hasegawa gave a nod and a sigh. "Two houses in one day today. .....Really, I don't know what's going on."

"The Young Madame, too?"

Tashiro nodded to the question of the unspoken disease with a dark expression.

"Right. Seems it took a toll on her body. Toshio worked himself desperately to try to treat it but said it was no good."

"That's, the Junior Doctor must be quite down about it too."

Yeah, Tashiro nodded. "……No, well, he's not the kind of guy to show it. So I mean, he was the same as ever but still. Lately he'd been constantly at her side, he seemed incredibly worn out. He seemed worse off for that more than anything."

Is that right, Katou murmured as he took a seat on a stool.

"……I'm beat," Tashirou mumbled to himself. "It was a tense vigil. Even the Mourning Crew seemed to be pretty cold hearted."

When Katou tilted his head, Hirosawa gave a wry smile.

"You know, because there are the rumors that it is an epidemic. To put it bluntly, they probably didn't want to help. Considering it was a vigil for the Ozakis, there weren't many mourners. The temple has their hands full too, so it was quite the understated vigil. And so the Elder Madame was in quite the foul mood."

"Right. So she took it out on the nurses," Tashiro sighed. "The nurses themselves had enough to be worked up about, it really was a dangerous atmosphere."

"Worked up about?"

"You know, with how busy they are every day. The hospital's open on Sundays now too. Lately it seems they haven't been getting enough time off, they must be tired I'm sure? On top of that to be treated so cruelly by the mourning crew. Don't touch the food, they were told, chased out of the kitchen, I heard. It can't be helped with the rumors of it being an epidemic but still. If it is contagious, the hospital would be its front line base, after all."

"Yeah……"

There were rumors that it was a contagious disease that was behind the continuous deaths but Katou himself was skeptical. It was true that there were a string of deaths in the village but it wasn't as if a disease would spring up in the village of all places that lead to deaths that didn't correspond to anything ever studied to date. Even putting that aside, to the nurses it must have been even more absurdly unreasonable. They were giving up their own

days off for the village's sake, and he had the feeling that they'd lose their tempers over the village itself ostracizing them for it.

"That's not all, it seems like one of the nurses has gone missing. A girl called Yuki-chan. Everyone's worried but lately Toshio's had his hands full with Kyouko-san. So because of that they've got some animosity towards Toshio too it seems."

"Missing?"

Hasegawa nodded. "I hope she didn't get caught up in something at least."

Tashiro spoke with open annoyance. "Really, what's going on in the village here? This number of casualties isn't normal. It was just the other day Yuuki-san's place's son died here, and Mutou-san's place---"

"How has Yuuki-san been since that? When I had last seen him at the funeral, he had seemed to have been at quite the loss but..."

And furthermore he'd heard that Yuuki's wife had left him behind and returned to her family home.

Hirosawa shook his head. He answered Hasegawa with a sad smile. "......At times like these, it'd be impossible to just get over it, I'd think. It was his only child after all."

That's true, Katou murmured. "It must be hard on Hasegawa-san just remembering such a thing."

Hasegawa had lost his only son before moving to the village.

"No," Hasegawa smiled. "I've already worked through my feelings on it. Enough time has passed for that in my case." So Hasegawa said with a smile but his tone was lonesome. He set a glass before Katou and poured in the water. "......Time is kind, in regards to these things. and it's impartial. I'm sure it will be kind to Yuuki-san as well."

"That's right," Katou nodded but he knew it was only their hope. Katou had a son too. He was the only child left behind by his

deceased wife. When he imagined Yuusuke going before him, he couldn't be too sure that the day would ever come when he would recover from the shock.

"After taking all of the trouble to move to the village. What on earth happened, I wonder?"

Hirosawa murmured, to which Hasegawa nodded. "Indeed. Yuuki-san may possibly move away on us."

That that was possible. Katou was a resident of the village. He didn't belong anywhere but here, but that wasn't true for Yuuki. Maybe Yuuki, too, thought that if only he hadn't come here, in regards to the situation. Maybe he planned to leave the village as soon as the funeral was finished. He couldn't think it odd if that were what he decided.

"Should I try paying him a visint?" Katou murmured. Even if there was nothing that he could do, nothing that he could say.

"You seem busy these days, though."

When Hasegawa said as much,

Katou nodded.

"But not at the shop."

"Ah, with the Contractors? It must be something for them, to have to hire outside help such as yourself."

Katou gave a vague smile. Katou had an electronics shop. He didn't exactly have it out on a sign board or anything but he also did work as an electrician. He was frequently enough subcontractd by the Contractors not only as an electrician but as one who could learn how to handle small household fixtures by watching, which meant that he had been relied on from time to time when the contractors were short on help.

"The contractors are in a pinch right now, aren't they?" Hirosawa said to which

Katou nodded.

"Yes. After all, Tokujirou-san had at last died on them."

The president of the Yasumori Contractors was Yasumori Mikiyasu. He inherited the business from his father Tokujirou but ever since the son Mikiyasu had died, the firm was once again looked after by Tokujirou. After that, Tokujirou had collapsed and the baton had been passed to Takeda who had been with the firm for a long while. As long as there were still employees there, they couldn't just shut everything down. It was possible that Tokujirou's son-in law or his sibling, that a parent company would inherit the Yasumori Contracting Firm.

"So I guess this is about it for them?"

"This isn't it at all. The contracting firm has Takeda-san looking over things, and it isn't as if things are particularly hectic because of Tokujirou-san's death." Hirosawa tilted his head. Katou gave a sad smile. "……At any rate, there is a lot of work to be done lately arranging the grave sites."

Ah, Hirosawa and Hasegawa both murmured unpleasantly.

"And with their workers busy with that, there's a lot of small service calls. There are a lot of work orders for sliding storm shutters or window frames."

"---Eh?"

At Hasegawa's questioning, Katou smiled wryly. Why he should have to smile in such a way, he himself didn't quite well know.

"Somehow lately everyone is cautious of locking their doors up it seems. It looks to be a trend. There are a lot of people replacing their old storm shutters, having steel frames put on their windows. Installing locks on them and the like."

"Is that.... right."

The same complicated type of smile that Katou had rose up on Hirosawa's face as well. Come to think of it, Hirosawa said as his

head tilted. "Our neighbors had construction done. They had it done on their entryway, they used to have a glass door but it'd been replaced with a proper door. .....I see, so that's a trend going around now, is it?"

Katou nodded.

"It seems to be. Turning household sliding doors to regular doors, or people blocking up their windows."

"Blocking their windows?"

As Hirosawa blinked,

Katou nodded.

"I wonder what's happening to this village?"

It was like they were afraid of something lurking outside of their houses. It was like they were protecting themselves from it. If you asked them individually, they would say it was because the fixtures were old, the doors weren't fitting as well, or because the children were grown up now; they all had appropriate reasons, but none the less.

".....It's like everyone is preparing to hole up in their houses."

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4

After finishing Ozaki Kyouko's vigil, Seishin went towards the church. In the darkness and the silence, with no figure of God at the altar, there was only the hollow on the verge of collapse. He waited a bit but there was no sound of approaching footsteps.

He couldn't stand looking at Kyouko's form for a moment longer. Likewise, he couldn't stand to see Toshio's emaciated face. He had no words for him, nor were there any words to be said to himself. Seishin and Toshio alike, throughout the short span of the ceremony, exchanged only formalities without so much as meeting each others gazes.

Seeing his emaciated state, he felt sympathetic. In truth, Toshio had been under harsh conditions since that summer. overrun with patients without any proper rest, he fruitlessly tended to the victims. The days at Kyouko's side must have been more pressure on Toshio than ever before. It wasn't unexpected that he would be wasting away. ---But.

It was the case that Toshio used Kyouko as an experiment, he thought. He could not forget that. Though his own wife was dead, betting on the possibility that she would revive, he concealed her death. When thinking of the fact that while Toshio was doing medical examinations on the first floor, on the second floor he was tending to Kyouko's dead body, a chill ran down Seishin's spine. And far from having any intent to keep her alive, Toshio observed her corpse, waiting for her revival.

Yes, Toshio had answered himself that he thought she might revive. Expecting that she might revive he concealed her corpse but that was not to save Kyouko had she revived. Toshio had already

made up his mind. The Shiki were enemies, they could not be left alive. Assuming he would be killing her from the start, he waited for Kyouko's revival. And as soon as he had seen her revival, he took blood samples and analtzed them, administered a variety of drugs to her, testing for how to effectively kill her. He used the woman who was his wife.

Toshio's actions were that of a barbarian. Just thinking of what took place in that operating room sent a chill down his spine. Toshio believed that what he was doing was an act of justice but to Seishin he was going off course. But maybe Seishin was the only one to think that.

If not for the existence of the Shiki, or rather without saving the village as his Just Cause, Toshio's actions would probably be seen as violence off the far end of insanity. No, even with that, to Seishin that was all that he could see it as. He could not understand how Toshio's mind worked to not show any signs of a guilty conscience.

Was there a need to go that far, he wondered. To submit the woman he married to cadaver tests all to look for a way to drive them out? Perhaps it was the same in the way the Shiki hunted humans, he realized. Yes---It was as Toshio had said, it was inevitable for the Shiki. If they did not hunt humans, they themselves would starve. The Shiki were carnivorous beasts. They lived by hunting others. If that was the case then why were carnivores, why was the act of eating meat declared to be evil?

But---looking at things from the perspective of the victims, it was an outrageous, pitiful death. He couldn't say to the victims that, like a lion hunting its prey, that with was the providence of nature.

---You just don't want to dirty your own hands.

Toshio's words were correct. Seishin did not want to become a mass murderer. Toshio's accusation that the reason he could be so placid about the Shiki was because he was not a Shiki, because their slaughtering was something on the opposite shore, removed and othered, may not have been incorrect.

However, Seishin looked up at the empty hollow the flashlight

shone into.

There was no god at the altar. There was nothing to denote what was good. Seishin himself had to find that answer, and yet he remained huddled and unmoving.

Maybe Seishin was the only one paralyzed by such a situation. In this too, Seishin was indeed a heretic.

Even while looking for the right thing to do, he couldn't find it. Even if he thought that it was good, he couldn't declare that it was. Just as he who wandered the wasteland had sought to offer up the most appropriate offering could not be understood by God who had only seen it as a breach of the covenant. Seishin was separated from the world thusly.

Caught up in his melancholic thoughts, he returned to the night roads in a more pessimistic mood than when he had arrived.

It was when he had neared the graveyard that he heard noises. He realized somebody had crossed the road ahead. Rather, it seemed that somebody was surprised by Seishin and hid themselves, he thought.

Seishin turned his flashlight towards it. Amongst the dried fall leaves rustled in the night wind, the shrubs and trees planted to outline the border of the graveyard, in that darkness it cowered.

When he shone the light in that direction, in its vicinity was a freshly posted sotoba. It was Yuuki Natsuno's grave. At its base was gathered a small bundle of flowers. They were clearly freshly placed. As if somebody had just laid them out.

They were all the types that grew wild in the nearby area. They were offered in the night. What could it be that would be unafraid of the night in this village? For what purpose did they take the trouble of placing flowers at Natsuno's grave?

"……Who is it?" Seishin did realize how comical himself calling out into the darkness was. "Is there somebody there?"

There was no answer in the darkness. The wilted leaves rustled in

the wind with a dry sound.

"I will speak my gratitute. Natsuno-kun is also likely pleased, I believe. .....However, it may be better to have done it during the day. Or is it that you are unable to visit the grave in the day time?"

Suddenly there was a faint voice. For an instant, Seishin thought that it was the cry of a small animal but as it continued he realized that it was unmistakably a human voice, and he ascertained furthermore that it was the voice of one desperately enduring something as if for their own life.

"Who might you be? It is dangerous to walk the roads at night. If you would like, shall I walk you home?"

You can't, a small voice sounded. Seishin unconsciously held his breath and went stiff.

(I can't come out..... Please do.)

Seishin released the breath he hadn't known he was holding. It was indeed a human voice, unmistakably a sound that came from a body with vocal chords. Somebody was lurking in the darkness whose will and intent it would be possible to understand. It was a human being and furthermore one which specifically held no will to harm Seishin.

"Who might you be?"

Seishin asked once again. The voice was young. He had thought he had heard the voice before but no concrete face rose to his mind.

"It is dangerous at night."

"I can't go out at any time besides the night, anymore."

"Please come out."

"I can't. .....I can't show my face."

"Why is that?"

In the darkness there was a vocal sob. "……Because I'm the one who has killed Natsuno."

Seishin suddenly had a realization. "You are---Is it perhaps Mutou-san's..."

"Please don't finish that sentence. If you could, please forget this. At the very least, please do not say anything to my father or to the family."

Seishin nodded. "……I understand."

"Junior Monk, you aren't surprised? You aren't afraid of me?"

"That's right, isn't it? ……I'm not afraid."

I see, he murmured. "Please, I'm asking politely, so please do not say anything to my father and the others. And I won't come anymore."

"I promise. I will forget about you. And I will be the one to stop coming about the graveyard."

So there is no need to stop visiting the grave, he had wanted to say but the other had leaked out a sob.

"I can't come anymore. It's true that I really did want to apologize to Natsuno but the truth is that I was waiting. I thought Natsuno might rise up. ……But Natsuno probably won't. It looks like it's no good at this point. If he hasn't risen up by now, Natsuno is probably going to stay dead." His faint voice leaked out with a sob. "I killed him. Natsuno isn't anywhere in this world anymore. And never will be. ……And I'm the one who did that. I know that. But I'm sad that Natsuno is gone. Incredibly sad."

"I know that."

Spoken to by Seishin, he cried in a hushed voice.

"He was like another little brother to me, Junior Monk. He was twisted in some ways, definitely cheeky, but he was a good guy. But now he's dead. Because I killed him. It wasn't that I wanted to kill

him, not at all. But if I didn't hunt Natsuno, my sister and brother would be attacked I was told....."

Seishin remained quiet, brows furrowing.

"I didn't want to do something like this. But there was no choice. They're just fine with ordering things like this. They don't care about how cruel it is. But even amongst them I have to do certain things or they won't help me, there's no other way to get by."

His faint sobs carried on the wind.

"They're Oni, real ones. They nave no compassion at all. The bunch of them, they should all just die without even one left alive. I really do think that, myself. But I'm one of them. Even I hunted and killed Natsuno."

"You were coerced weren't you?"

"That's right. I wanted to protect my family. That's why I attacked Natsuno. But I can't use that as an excuse. .....After all, even now I'm coming back from attacking someone else."

Seishin held his breath.

"Isn't it a pathetic story? I'm coming here to visit Natsuno's grave, thinking I'm sorry for killing, resenting them for ordering it, while attacking another human. That's, I knew it wasn't right. There was no helping it with Natsuno, but at the same time I'm not being ordered or threatened and I'm continuing to hunt people, and I knew that wasn't right. But I'm hungry, you know. ---Isn't it funny? I'm just that hungry. If I don't eat something, I'll die, I think. I can't bare that and so I'm choosing on my own to go out killing."

Seishin unthinkingly hung his head.

"When I get hungry I get to thinking what's so bad about killing people? I say, I mean, I've already killed even Natsuno. I really regret killing him but even while I think 'so let's stop this,' I'm told that if I don't continue to attacking them, when they come back to consciousness, they'll go do something somewhere to make us public. I don't want to be discovered. I don't want my dad and my

mom to know I've become this. I don't want anyone to know. If it gets out, won't my dad and mom be blamed by everyone? I don't want that to happen to them. Thinking that, I continue to attack them, and then they end up dying."

"That is..... Not your fault."

It was because the Shiki cannot live without attacking people. That's what it was to be a predator. None the less, his conscience hadn't died. Even though his way of life and survival had fundamentally changed, his conscience hadn't changed at all. That was---entirely too cruel.

"I was threatened and attacked Natsuno. But lately I wonder if that was really the case. They said that if I didn't attack Natsuno, my family would be attacked. They enjoy doing that. They knew I got along with Natsuno and went through the trouble of ordering it. I didn't go against it and did just what they said but, I mean I made the excuse to myself that I wanted to protect my family but it isn't as if doing it can really stop anyone else from attacking my dad and the others. It's not as if I can protect them. Just like I'm hunting others, any other one of us might attack them. When I thought of that, all I could say to myself was to run away from Sotoba, but if I was going to say run away, I should have done so before attacking Natsuno."

"That is....."

"That was what I had to do, Junior Monk. But I did not. I was threatened into attacking Natsuno but I don't think that was really the case. I think that I always knew. That I couldn't live without attacking somebody. That I have to kill people. The others are the same way. As long as they're in Sotoba, they'll be attacked. Even Natsuno would eventually have to be attacked by somebody. If he was going to be killed anyway, if there was no choice but to kill him, I think I thought it was better if I did it. At least, if he had to be killed anyway, I'm sure I thought it was better to be killed by somebody he knew than somebody he'd never even seen."

With that he let out a self-depreciating laugh.

"I'm spoiled. I knew him, I got along with him. If I did something to a complete stranger, wouldn't it feel like I'd never be forgiven? But Natsuno was a friend and a little brother. Even if somebody else wouldn't forgive me, I had the feeling he'd forgive me. But if that was the case, I should've attacked my dad. My little brother or sister would've been better too. But I had the feeling that if I did something terrible to my family, that'd be unforgivable to in another way. So I attacked Natsuno."

His dry laugh warped into a sobbing tone.

"So I killed him like that thinking he might rise up and came every night to check on it. I didn't want Natsuno to die. Natsuno is precious to me. But even that as wrong. If Natsuno rose, if he didn't stay dead, it'd write off the fact that I killed him. As long as Natsuno wasn't erased from this world, while I'd still have attacked him, it wouldn't mean I killed him. That's why I wanted him to rise up. .....That's the kind of guy I am."

That was a natural, human way to feel, Seishin wanted to say to comfort him, but the words woudln't come. Was he going to say: it's only natural, so don't worry about it and keep on attacking? He couldn't very well recommend that and so there was no meaning in comforting him.

"To be honest it's food he didn't rise up. He shouldn't become a monster like me. But since Natsuno isn't rusing, I'm a murderer, and so I don't have the duty to come here anymore. I don't have the right to say please don't be dead for me. I'm being spoiled by Natsuno like this too. Just like how he left the window open to the end for me."

Seishin gazed into the darkness.

"If I said 'sorry', he'd say it couldn't be helped. So I had a feeling that even if I came to the grave he'd forgive me. But I didn't want someone who'd say that to me to die. The one who made him die, even while he was so previous to me, the one who killed him was me."

Seishin took a heavy breath. His thoughts were slipping away

into a hole. A dark hole there was no salvation from. And as long as his existence continued, he would never escape from it. If there was anything that could be his salvation, his heart and his compassion---everything that made him what he was, would have to be abandoned, until massacre did not move his heart, the equivalent of the destruction of himself.

Seishin took in a breath.

"Human existence is in such a way, truly such a sadness, isn't it....."

"It really is."

So he said as the sound of himself pushing through the underbrush was heard. His presence was growing further away. At last he disappeared into the night winds.

Seishin breathed a deep sigh and then returned to the temple office, spreading out his manuscript.

He himself knew that it was a sin and that by that sin he could not be accepted into the order, that he would be completely denied for it. God would not overlook his sin, his sin would not be allowed. He would be judged and driven from paradise. Indeed it was as it had happened and now he had been exiled to the wastelands.
He lost his hometown, he lost his God, he lost any possibility of being accepted. He lost his little brother, he lost his world, leaving him with not but the poetic struggle, but the lamentation, but the curses upon him. In slaying his little brother, he gained nothing at all, and there was nothing to save him.
I swear, I by no means wanted to kill you.
He called out to the already fading dim light dyeing the empty sky before him. As if in answer the distant will-o'-the-wisps lit up in the distance.
He walked towards it as if draw forward. Surrounded by the will-o'-the-wisps, the Shiki stood there.
His little brother's eyes were, as expected, fixated upon him.

Those two eyes gazed directly at him with no hint of blame. Now his little brother looked nothing like a person in a painting. The great earth that was the wasteland his little brother stood in, the somber night, that spectacle still did not strike him as a picture. It should have been the very picture of melancholy itself. None the less, as he did not suit the setting to be the least bit like a man in such a painting, he did not have the slightest feeling of the separation of one who was gazing only at a picture.

The green hill, the wasteland that surrounded it. Said another way, within the wasteland the hill was a completely isolated, spiritual world. The hill was a variation within the wasteland, and he by being what was different from what it was he was within, was also a heretic. So in that way perhaps he was suited to the wasteland. In fact perhaps in regards to wandering the earth, it was his little brother who was more ill suited.

A painting of a man wandering the great and dreary earth, --- perhaps he had been entered into such a painting, and perhaps it was the little brother who was looking at that painting. As a man living within the painting, maybe he saw his spectator, his little brother who had become a Shiki, as an outsider. Perhaps to his little brother who looked over him in the green fields, he had looked like a Shiki.

Even just the memory of the sight of his little brother standing in the green fields struck him now. Now long chased from that hill, despite having no way to ever return to it, he was ripe with the desire to enter back into that picture.

When he had wielded a weapon against his little brother, by in fact destroying the painting with that motion, perhaps he had wanted to resolutely bring an end to his poetic, laboriously written struggles and unease, perhaps that was the nature of his action.

In fact in cutting himself off from the world, he had entirely forfeited his claim to it. But at the same time he did at least have to wonder why the world would not accept him. He had now become freed from the poetic struggle he had with such a question.

The world rejected him because he was a sinner.

As for a reason why, all he could think of was that it was

because he could not escape the expectation that the world would not accept him. Being ever unable to throw off that expectation, it was ever a distant irritation.
In becoming the slaughterer of his little brother, he had created within himself a complete despair as an equilibrium, a form of stability perhaps.

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5

When Motoko opened her eyes and looked towards her bedside clock it was past two in the morning. Frantically she pushed aside the futon and rose up.

She was only wearing her nightclothes. Ever since her daughter Shiori had collapsed, Motoko had been like this, having not changed out of her night clothes, sleeping in the tatami room next door. Shiori was set to sleep in the tatami room. The single sliding foor to the room was still open. By the light there in the tatami room she could see Shiori in the futon that had been laid out.

She had overslept. Even though she'd asked her mother-in-law Tomiko to wake her to switch shifts at two o'clock. Entering into the tatami room, she saw Tomiko sleeping at Shiori's bedside. Motoko sighed for some reason.

"Mother-in-law, we will switch now, so please get up and go to bed."

She lightly shook Tomiko but Tomiko who was lying with the zabuton seating pillow as a pillow did not respond. Motoko let her be for the time being and looked to Shiori's face.

Shiori's lips were parted as if in a small gasp. Her small face was poorly colored, the color of aged and faded paper. Her long eyelashes were firmly set shut. The sheer innocence of that sleeping face pulled at Motoko's heartstrings. She was so young, so helpless, and yet so very dear.

She reached out to gently pat her small head. It seemed like her fever had gone down. At first relieved, Motoko then noticed something strange. Was not her breathing just a little too quiet?

It couldn't be, she thought. It's my imagination.

To dispel her groundless fear she held out her hand beneath Shiori's nose and waited. She didn't feel an exhale.

An unvoiced shriek caught in her throat. A breath she couldn't expel stopped her up.

With probing fingertips she neared the eyes. Lightly tapping her face, she shook her body.

Motoko turned to Tomiko.

"---Mother-in-law!"

She shook Tomiko, pounted at her chest. Tomiko herself had quite the peaceful breathing in her sleep.

"Mother-in-law! Wake up!"

Motoko's shaking of Tomiko became gradually more violent. She grasped at the nape of her neck and shook with all her might.

"Why are you sleeping?! Why didn't you wake me?!"

Tomiko barely opened her eyes.

"Wake up, will you! How can you sleep so care-freely! I told you I would switch places with you and to wake me!"

"What....."

Tomiko's voice was sleepy. With no signs of recognizing anything as out of the ordinary, she once again closed her eyes sleepily. Motoko's breath stopped. The hand still shaking her did not relinquish any of their force as they slammed Tomiko's head down into the zabuton.

"Wake up! This is no time to be half asleep, you, Shiori is--because of you!"

Still gripping the nape of her neck, Motoko lifted Tomiko's head

up and bashed it into the zabuton. Tomiko groaned, her face scrunched, but she didn't resist nor even scream. The only one screaming was Motoko.

"You old crooone, you let Shiori die, didn't you!"

Motoko threw Tomiko aside and gently embraced Shiori's body. She broke down screaming Shiori's name.

Tomiko sat up dumbfounded. She stared dubiously at Motoko and her granddaughter. Tilting her head, she sluggishly scratched at her neck.